

INTERNO!



TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE



ISSUE 14
£5.00 UK
\$6.95 USA
\$10.00 CANADA

ENTER THE INFERNO!™

YOU MAY NOT be aware of it, but everything that could go wrong just has. Well, almost.

I am writing this just after the world was supposed to end according to old Necromundus (or whatever the daft old Bretonnian geezer's name was). Well, it didn't, but just about everything else here in the Black Library did. We've had computers blowing up by the score, thousands of comics go missing, the e-mail going down, DAT tapes corrupting, art archives vanishing... Even as I sit here, typing this last desperate message to the world, red lights are blazing across my monstrous video-desk control console (I can see you, mindslave Pickstock! use the fire-extinguisher, for heaven's sake!) and klaxons are sounding off all over the place. We have asked for help, but the Emperor's finest (yeah, right) are over-committed and cannot help. We must do what we can on our own. Clearly there is no hope – it's obviously the

end of a glorious empire. Sigh. That's it. Goodbye, so long and thanks for all the...

BUT WAIT! Think. Think! In times of stress, what does any good boss do? Rally the troops... mount a counterstrike... fight desperately against all odds to save the— Mmmm, errr, I know, I'll... jump on a plane and... and... go to New York for a few days! Yes, great idea! I'll go to, um... sign an important deal. Yes, yes, this just gets better. And I'll take the manuscripts for the next new novels with me to read on the plane, so that almost counts as work, doesn't it? I could visit Gamesday USA whilst I'm at it. And I've even got my Inferno! 14 to read. Splendid!

Well, that's me convinced. If the

ship's sinking, no reason for me to drown! What's good enough for rats is good enough for the editor! Scamper-scamper-squeak-squeak-splash, that's what I say.

If the smoke's cleared enough for me to return, I'll see you at UK Gamesday in a few weeks' time. Till then, gotta dash. Bye.

Andy Jones
Editor



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Product Code: 60 24 99 99 014

ISBN 1-869893-73-5



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KNOW THINE ENEMY



BY GAV
THORPE

THE MASSIVE, slab-sided fuselage of the Thunderhawk gunship shook and rattled as it plunged through the upper atmosphere of the planet Slato. The roaring of its massive jets and the rumbling of the air against the armoured hull filled the interior with a deafening cacophony. The air glowed around the falling gunship as the armoured beak of its cockpit and the leading edge of its stubby wings glowed white-hot with the friction of its entry from orbit.

Brother Ramesis, chaplain of the 4th Company of the Salamanders Space Marine Chapter, felt the craft hit an area of low pressure and drop several hundred feet in a couple of seconds, pushing him up into the harness which secured him to the inner side of the gunship's fuselage. As the Thunderhawk plummeted deeper into the thick cloud of Slato's skies the passage became smoother, and half a minute later the pilot activated the standby lights. The padded restraints arched up into the wall above Ramesis's head with a hiss of hydraulics and he stretched his arms, the servos within his powered armour whirring quietly as they matched the movement. He felt pressure on his back as the Thunderhawk's machinery implanted his backpack into the socket along his armour's spine, then dropped the ablative shoulder pads down on either side of his head. Now fully armoured, Ramesis stood up and walked steadily along the decking of the Thunderhawk, passing his gaze over the twenty-six assembled Space Marines. Each was conducting their own pre-battle rituals: checking weapons, comms or armour one last time, wishing each other the Emperor's benevolence or just praying quietly.

Ramesis activated a rune set into a bulkhead and the door to the small chapel-room slid out of sight. Stepping inside, the chaplain lit an ornate brazier in the middle of the altar and then knelt on one knee before it, bringing his clenched fists to his forehead in a sign of worship. Standing, he took his rosarius, the Shield of the Emperor, from the reliquary to the left of the altar. Kneeling

again, he cupped the great arcane device in both hands, running his fingers around its circular edge, seeing his face mirrored in the twelve gems set in concentric circles on its black enamelled surface.

‘Beneficent Emperor, who rules the stars and guideth mankind,’ Ramesis chanted as his thumbs gently pressed the jewels on the rosarius in the ritual pattern, ‘Cast thy divine protection over me, your eternal servant. Though I gladly shed my blood in your honour, keep me from ignoble death so that I might continue to serve thy greatness. I live that I might serve thee. As I serve thee in life, may I serve thee in death.’

As he completed his ritual, the rosarius hummed into life. Ramesis could feel the Emperor’s protective aura pulsing from its depths and it gladdened his soul. Hanging the rosarius’s heavy chain around his neck, Ramesis stood and turned to the reliquary to the right. From within the intricately carved wooden box, fashioned by his own hand during his time as a Chaplain Novitiate, Ramesis took out his crozius arcanum, grasping its two-foot haft tightly in both gauntleted hands. Again Ramesis knelt before the altar clutching the crozius to his chest, its eagle-shaped head resting against the similar eagle blazon embossed on the armoured plastron across his chest.

‘Beneficent Emperor, who ruleth the stars and guideth mankind. Guideth my hand that I might smite thine enemies. Invest this weapon with thine anger. Let mine arm be the instrument of thy divine wrath. As you keep me in life, let me bring death to thine enemies.’

With the invocation complete, Ramesis slid the firing stud in the haft of the crozius into its forward, active position. With a simple press of his finger, the eagle of the crozius would be surrounded by a shimmering disruption field, capable of smashing bone and shattering the thickest armour. Truly, the ways of the Machine God are miraculous, Ramesis thought.

As the final part of the Consecration to Battle, Ramesis hung his crozius from his belt and took his golden, skull-faced helm from its position in front of the flickering brazier.

‘Beneficent Emperor, who rules the stars and guideth Mankind. Let mine eyes look upon your magnificence. Let mine eyes see truly all things fair and foul. Let mine eyes tell friend from foe that I might know thine enemy.’ Ramesis placed the helm over his head, twisting it slightly so that the vacuum seals clamped into place. He turned a dial on his left wrist and the helmet pressurised with the rest of the power armoured suit.

‘Tactical display,’ the chaplain commanded his armour, and his vision was filled with an enhanced image of the outside: details of temperature, atmospheric pressure, light density and other factors were superimposed over his sight. As he rolled his head left and right to check the suit’s calibration, Ramesis swiftly completed the other pre-battle procedures, double-checking the suit’s power and exhaust assembly, the internal environment monitors, targeting crosshairs and myriad other systems that would keep him alive in the midst of battle, even in the depths of space.

The comm-speaker inside Ramesis’s helmet chimed and the pilot informed him they were soon to land.

Ramesis strode out into the main chamber, where the other Space Marines of his force waited for him, their quietly sincere conversations showing they were eager for battle too. At his approach, though, they fell silent.

‘Today we are joined by Brother Xavier, who has proved himself worthy enough to move on from his initiation.’ The Space Marines raised their fists in praise of the newcomer, who bowed his head in thanks.

‘Brother Xavier has served in Tenth Company for twenty-five years, and many are his battle honours,’ Xavier informed them. ‘I am pleased to welcome him to our Company and this, his first conflict as a full battle-brother, is indeed an honourable and auspicious one. We have come to this world to fulfil our duty as the protectors of mankind., There is no mission more sacred or righteous in its cause.

‘Several weeks ago an expedition from the newly founded colony on this world

discovered something ancient and terrible. Their explorers found an alien device, a thing of great evil – for it has been placed here by the Eldar.'

The Salamanders hissed and snarled in anger, for their Chapter had a long history of fighting Eldar pirates. Their home planet of Nocturne had been plagued by the alien corsairs for millennia before the Emperor had arrived to bring them salvation. Ramesis himself had fought against the Eldar on numerous occasions and was unreserved in his loathing of the capricious aliens.

'We have been told by the worshippers of the Machine God that this device is a gateway, a portal to the Immaterium,' the chaplain continued solemnly. 'Soldiers from the colony's garrison were despatched to guard this portal while it is investigated, to ensure that the Eldar did not attempt to use this gateway to attack Slato. However, they are few and our divine claim to this world, as well as the lives of two hundred thousand colonists, requires that we aid them. We have learned in the last few hours that the Eldar have indeed attacked Slato. Even as we descend, their warriors are assaulting the Emperor's servants at the portal. Our augurs and surveyors tell us that they are relatively few in number at present, but if they gain access to their gateway then they will be able to bring on untold numbers of reinforcements. If that happens, our fight to protect this world will be all that much harder.'

Ramesis allowed a moment for his battle-brothers to digest this news. He was glad to be facing the Eldar again, for the deaths of many of his ancestors stained their hands and he looked forward to every opportunity to repay the blood-debt.

'Let us pray!' Ramesis commanded the assembled Space Marines. They turned to face him and bowed their heads in acquiescence. As Ramesis spoke he walked along the two lines of warriors, touching each on the chest with the palm of his hand, passing on the blessing of the Emperor and their Primarch.

'May the Emperor look kindly on our endeavours today,' he chanted. 'May his

eternal spirit steer us ever on the path of light. May revered Vulkan, Primarch of our Chapter, watch over us. May we have the strength and wisdom that we will not fail them in honour and duty. Praise the Emperor!'

'Praise the Emperor!' the Space Marines replied in a deep chorus. At that moment a siren sounded twice and the pilot's voice sounded over the comm-net.

'Alien interceptors on an attack approach,' the pilot said hastily. 'Assume battle positions.'

The Space Marines each stepped back into the small alcove which served as their resting place during transportation, grabbing hold of the brass grip rails to steady themselves. Hurriedly Ramesis ducked back into the chapel to extinguish the sacred brazier before taking his own position. The Thunderhawk banked sharply to starboard for a moment, the artificial muscles within Ramesis's armour easily compensating for the movement. The gunship continued to zigzag sluggishly to evade the Eldar fighters, before a sudden screech rent the air and a bolt of energy smashed against the armoured fuselage. The blast was mirrored inside the hull in a spray of violet energy, and Brother Lysonis was hurled to the decking. Ramesis took a step forward to aid the veteran-sergeant, but his comrade held up a hand to indicate he was well, before slowly standing up. Sparks of energy crackled around a gash in his abdominal armour, but there was no blood. The blast had just inflicted a glancing hit on the Space Marine. As Lysonis reclaimed his place in one of the unoccupied alcoves, the gunship's reeling interior echoed with the sound of more energy bolts hitting the hull. Another fusillade was followed by the thump of a detonation, sending the gunship falling to one side.

'We've lost two engines,' the pilot informed them in a calm voice. 'Prepare for emergency landing!'

Ramesis felt his weight lightening as the Thunderhawk pushed forward into a steep dive, rushing down towards Slato's surface. For perhaps half a minute the rapid descent continued until the pilot

fired the retro-jets, all but stopping the gunship dead in mid-air. The sudden increase in g-forces would have crushed a normal man, but Ramesis hardly even noticed, protected by the strength of his genetically modified physique and further enhanced by his ancient suit of power armour. With a skidding impact the Thunderhawk hit the ground a moment later, sliding to the right for several seconds before coming to a halt. Within a heartbeat the assault ramp had been lowered and Ramesis was charging out, the rest of his force pounding down the ramp behind him.



THIS IS Brother-Captain Nubean. We have made landfall in the high ground, at position secundus-deca as intended. Ramesis, lead your force to point secundus-octus; I will converge on your position from the other side.' Even carried across several miles by the comm-net, Nubean's voice was as clear to Ramesis as if he were next to him. The chaplain signalled an affirmative and then switched frequencies to address the Space Marines under his own command.

'Advance by squads, pattern Enflamus. Squads Delphus and Lysonis will lead; squad Malesti will form rear guard,' Ramesis ordered in a clipped, precise tone. The three sergeants signalled confirmation and the two lead squads set off at a trot, the long strides of their power armoured legs covering the ground quickly. Ramesis fell in with Veteran Sergeant Malesti, whom he had known since he was first inducted into the Chapter. They had fought together as scouts in the Tenth Company and though Ramesis had advanced more rapidly in the Chapter's hierarchy, they still shared a special friendship. As they ran along, Ramesis modified the comm-net controller on his wrist so that he could talk with Malesti alone.

'Eldar again, my brother. We will have to be vigilant.' Though Ramesis's words seemed grim, he was in a light mood. It had been several weeks since he had been

in battle and had looked forward with anticipation to fighting once more against the Emperor's enemies.

'We have defeated the Eldar before,' Malesti replied. 'We know their guile. Their arcane trickeries and sorceries will not avail them against us this time.'

'I share your confidence, brother,' Ramesis said. 'Captain Nubean is a strong commander. The honour of the Fourth Company prospers under his guidance.'

'And yours!' Malesti added with a chuckle. 'In the years you have been our chaplain, our battle-brothers' faith has been sure and steady. They conduct themselves with honour and respect, and do all that we ask of them and more. They do not fail in their duties as warriors of the Adeptus Astartes and they shall not fail us this day either.'

'They'll fight like steppe-lions, of that I'm sure!' Ramesis remarked.

They continued in silence for a while, jogging easily through the waist-high grasses of the plain, turned into a blaze of gold by Slato's setting star. A few miles to the north ahead of them, the plains rose quickly into the foothills that eventually became a sharp mountain range. In every other direction stretched leagues of cereal plants, heavy with grain. The majority of Slato's landmass was given over to farming. Food grown here would feed the workers on mining worlds and industrial hive planets. Without such agri-worlds, the Imperium's labour forces would starve and the eternal manufacturing of arms and armour would cease, spelling the end for mankind's presence in the sector. It was paramount that Slato did not fall into the hands of the Eldar.



IN THE LAST rays of the alien sun, Ramesis's force was continuing its forced march, making their way swiftly along one of the mountain valleys. But for the last few minutes, the sound of cannonfire had been echoing off the valley's steep sides.

'It appears the Eldar are engaged in another attack,' Malesti was speculating.

'Landing behind the accursed aliens' position may prove to be an advantage: we can catch them between our guns and those of the guardsmen at the portal. The Emperor has blessed us.'

'Beware of over-confidence, my brother,' Ramesis warned. 'The Eldar are as slippery as a lava serpent and twice as venomous. They may have left a rearguard to protect them from such an attack.'

'True,' Malesti said. 'That is why we have come with two separate forces, so that if one were delayed the other may still fight through. With the Emperor's blessing...'
Malesti's voice trailed away. His attention had become fixed on something ahead. Ramesis followed his gaze and saw that the two squads leading the march had halted. He was about to signal Sergeant Lysonis when the comm-net chimed in his ear.

'Chaplain Ramesis, this is Sergeant Lysonis. The valley ahead is filled with woodland, a possible ambush site. Request orders.'

'I'll be at your position shortly. Stay alert,' Ramesis commanded.

A minute had passed before Ramesis and Squad Malesti reached the other Space Marines where they were half-hidden in the long grass and rocks of the valley floor. The woodland ahead nestled firmly in the base of the valley which they had been following, stretching up the mountain slopes to either side. It was impossible to tell how far along the valley the woods continued, but Ramesis did not even consider the option of circumnavigating it. To do so would cost valuable time and still offered no surety that they would reach the site of the gateway unhindered. Ramesis peered at the small forest, trying to discern any activity in the shadowy depths between the thin, tightly clustered boles of the trees.

'Sergeant Lysonis, activate your auspex. See if you can detect anything within those woods.' Ramesis's order was quiet but authoritative.

'We risk the Eldar detecting the signal, chaplain. They may not know we are here yet.' Lysonis cautioned.

'Rest assured, sergeant,' Ramesis informed him, 'The Eldar are very aware of our presence. Even if their machines did not locate us, their mind-magic will undoubtedly have detected our presence by now.'

The sergeant's head was bowed as he unhooked the auspex from his utility belt and adjusted the dials. As he held it in one hand, passing it left and right in the direction of the woods, its screen threw a flickering green glow onto the black paint of his armour, harshly lighting the helmet from underneath, so that he almost looked like some Daemon from the pits of Chaos. Lysonis adjusted one of the many brass dials set next to the display, then tapped a switch into a different position.

'There are definitely human-sized life signals within the woods, chaplain, possibly a dozen or more,' Lysonis reported, replacing the arcane device on his belt and pulling his power sword from its scabbard.

Ramesis looked at the trees once more, seeking any sign of movement or life. There were none. After glancing at the chronometer reading on his visual display, the chaplain made a decision.

'We do not have time to circumnavigate the woods. Prepare for attack. May the Emperor guide our weapons.' As he spoke, Ramesis strode to the front of the gathered Space Marines.

'For the Emperor and Vulkan!' Ramesis cried as he sprinted forward, the actuators of his armour turning every step into a bounding leap across the plain. Around him the Salamanders charged forward too, echoing his battle cry. The air was filled by a soft whistling noise and Ramesis noticed tiny slivers of crystal starting to patter off the armour of the Space Marines around him. Looking into the woods once again, half-seen shadows of movement caught Ramesis's attention as another volley of fire swept into the Space Marines. Behind him Ramesis heard a startled cry. He looked back over his shoulder to see what had happened. One of the Space Marines of Squad Delphus, Brother Lastus, was clutching at his helmet with one hand. Another member

of the squad turned on his heel to grab Lastus's arm and haul him forwards. As the chaplain looked on, the toxins contained within the crystal sliver were already seeping into Lastus's bloodstream. The Space Marine gave a choked cry and his body began to shudder. The power armour amplified the shivering Space Marine's movements into flailing paroxysms as Lastus dropped his boltgun and fell to one knee.

'Sniper's needle hit Brother Lastus in the eye-plate,' Sergeant Delphus reported over the comm-link.

'Bring him with us!' Ramesis ordered as he turned his attention back to the woods. The first of the Space Marines were fifty paces from the trees now. Squad Lysonis stopped their advance and as one they raised their bolters and let loose a salvo of fire. Explosive bolts tore through the woodland, smashing swathes of shredded leaf and bark into the air, shattering branches and punching gaping holes into the boles of the trees. Ramesis heard a high-pitched cry and a figure staggered forward from the shadows, a hand raised to its shoulder where bright red blood was spilling down the ever-shifting camouflage colours of its cape. It was tall and swathed in a long coat that shifted colour to match the shades of the trees and grass. Ramesis aimed his pistol, the crosshair imposed over his vision fixing on the Eldar's hooded face. He could see its thin, pointed nose, the delicate features of its high cheeks and brow, and a pair of large eyes glittering with alien intelligence. The chaplain squeezed softly on the trigger and a moment later the Eldar's skull exploded, the headless body flung forward several yards by the bolt's detonation.

As he reached the treeline, Ramesis found three more alien bodies. The first had two massive holes blown in its chest, another's leg was ripped off at the hip while the third had been turned into an almost unidentifiable crimson mess by several simultaneous bolter hits. Looking back across the grasslands, Ramesis saw Lastus being carried between two of his battle-brothers who were firing their bolters with their free hands. The

wounded Marine was still twitching as his system tried to clear away the alien poisons. The armour of another Space Marine lay close by, sprawled in the grass like a casually discarded doll. The chaplain could see a neat hole in the flexible armour of the warrior's left hip joint where the needle shot had entered. The shot must have hit a major artery for it to have killed the bio-enhanced Space Marine so quickly.

'May thy soul be forever in the light of the Emperor. By His grace he has taken you into his embrace. Serve him as well in death as your sacrifice served him in life,' intoned Ramesis, whilst inwardly cursing his force's lack of an apothecary. He could not afford for one of his warriors to carry the dead Space Marine's body and by the time the apothecary from Captain Nubean's formation could arrive, the fallen fighter's gene-seed would be useless. And every gene-seed not recovered was lost forever, weakening the Chapter.

Glancing around, Ramesis saw that all of the remaining men had reached the shelter of the trees. Of the Eldar there was no sign. For the next few minutes the dim light was occasionally broken by the orange glow cast by the jets of fire from Squad Delphus's flamer as the Space Marines methodically swept through the trees for any surviving Eldar. Ramesis sent Squad Malesti ahead to ascertain whether the route to the rendezvous with Captain Nubean was clear, then sought out Brother Lastus.

The chaplain found him crouched with his back against the trunk of a tree, thumbing bolts from a pouch at his belt into a boltgun magazine. Beside him was his helmet, with the left eyepiece cracked. Blood was dried across the left side of Lastus's face, a reddish stain against his dark skin, and his left eye had been stitched shut. The rest of his face was marked by the scars of the Salamanders' ritual branding. Three dragon-heads were scorched into his forehead, each representing a commendation from the Company captain, whilst several lines were scarred along his nose and chin, each scar burnt forever as recognition for

a particularly noteworthy kill. As Ramesis approached, Lastus looked up.

'I'd swear that devil-spawned Eldar had been aiming for Brother Nitrus next to me. No accuracy, these aliens!' the Space Marine joked.

'How are you faring, brother?' Ramesis asked, crouching next to Lastus and removing his own helmet.

'I can fight on,' Lastus declared with a wide grin that curled the lines of his scars into ragged swirls. 'The toxin is still affecting my hearing and smell, but my vision is almost clear. Well, through this one, anyway.' He stuck a thumb towards his good eye.

'And how is your aim, Brother Lastus?' Ramesis asked. He needed to know how much he could rely upon his Battle-Brother in a firefight.

'Still true, lord,' Lastus assured him. The Space Marine gestured towards his helmet. 'That's an old Mark VI Regis pattern. It can compensate for the loss of one eye by boosting another signal through the remaining optical link. I won't even realise I'm handicapped. It fits a bit tightly – I almost asked for a different helmet when the armour was given to me – but praise the Emperor I persevered with it.'

Ramesis stood up and told Lastus to report back to Sergeant Delphus. With a salute the battle-brother fixed his helmet back on and strode off towards the other Space Marines.

Sergeant Malesti strode up to Ramesis and reported that the firesweep was complete; no other Eldar had been discovered.

'Understood,' Ramesis replied, rubbing a hand through the short curls of his hair before donning his own helmet once more. 'Lead the force to the ridge. The Eldar definitely know now from which direction we approach, and Captain Nubean will not want to tarry long waiting for us.'



RAMESIS AND his force arrived at the rendezvous point first. As the sun dipped below the horizon, Ramesis's vision was augmented by the aura-intensifier of his helmet, bathing his view of the landscape in a red sheen. From the crest of a ridge the chaplain could see the repeated glow of the Imperial Guard guns, further up into the mountains. It was another hour before Captain Nubean and his Space Marines marched into view. With the aid of the artificial eyes of his armour, the chaplain could see the shimmering heat surrounding the advancing force, plumes of pure white jetting from the exhaust vents cut into their armoured backpacks. Their guns glowed a dim red, which Ramesis knew could only mean they had been involved in a protracted battle. As they came closer, Ramesis did a quick head count: there were twenty-one of them, seven less than had set out. Several more appeared to be wounded and as Captain Nubean approached with his command squad, Ramesis could see that Apothecary Suda's reductor was covered in the dark red of Space Marine blood; he had been busy extracting the progenoid glands from the missing warriors. The gene-seed he had recovered would allow the Chapter to create more Space Marines to replace those that had fallen.

'We were ambushed shortly after insertion,' Nubean explained as he stopped in front of Ramesis. 'They came in fast, carried inside two fast, skimming transports, our weapons unable to penetrate the force shields protecting the vehicles. There was another anti-grav tank there too, gliding out around us, trying to pick us off with rapid volleys from a pulse laser. Brother Kolenn managed to take it down with his lascannon, but not after Squad Mauria lost three warriors. We were mostly facing regular line troops, which did not present much of a challenge. Their shuriken catapults were unable to penetrate our armour, while our bolters punched them off their feet with every shot! It was the specialists, the ones they call Striking Scorpions, that caused me the most consternation – we've fought them before, Ramesis...'

'I remember. It was on Corronis Four. Close combat experts, with those infernal laser dischargers in their helmets,' Ramesis said, gesturing with a finger either side of his jaw to imitate the aliens' strange mandible-like weaponry.

'That's them,' Nubean agreed. 'Their armour was as good as ours; our bolters were virtually useless. They had managed to slip behind us, elusive scum. It was Squad Gorla that they attacked first. Their leader had some kind of power glove, punched through Sergeant's Gorla's chest with ease. We managed to stave off the others by getting a crossfire on the alien wretches, and once that distraction had been disposed off we could concentrate our fire on the close combat fighters. We left none of them alive,' Nubean finished with a grim smile.

The captain pointed to a Space Marine whose left arm ended at the elbow in a blackened stump; with his other arm the wounded warrior was gesturing expansively to Sergeant Lysonis, not at all disconcerted by his injury.

'Brother Kahli's plasma gun detonated, but he brought two of the enemy down first,' Nubean explained. 'That's the fourth time in the last seven missions I have had a plasma weapon failure, though this is the first time it has been so catastrophic. I will have words with the Master of the Forges when we return. It matters not that our plasma weapons are ancient artefacts, I need them to be better maintained.'

The captain turned his gaze towards the distant flashes of fire coming from the distant Imperial Guard encampment. 'We must press on. I want to reach the Imperial Guardsmen before dawn,' he said, turning his attention back to Ramesis. 'It was well we did not try to mount an airborne landing at the battle sector itself. We came across a pair of the enemy's anti-aircraft vehicles about four miles back. They have gigantic crystalline lasers; they would have shot the Thunderhawks out of the sky with ease.' With a thin smile, the captain directed Ramesis's attention to two thin columns of smoke to the south. 'Still, they won't be causing us any more worries.'

The captain's face grew serious again. 'I only wish we had more time for proper reconnaissance, but the Imperial Guard cannot be expected to hold their defence while scouts locate the main Eldar positions.'

'I've never known the Eldar to form a static camp, captain,' Ramesis commented.

'That is true,' the captain agreed, his helmet moving slightly as he nodded his head. 'If we had waited to find them we may have wasted what precious time we have. As you once taught us, Ramesis, we must always temper action with wisdom. Though we live for battle, a war is fought with wits as well as weapons.'

'I'm afraid I cannot take the credit for that, brother,' Ramesis confessed with a wry smile. 'I took it from the sermons of Chaplain Gorbiam, my tutor during my time as a Novitiate.'

The captain removed his helmet and took a deep breath. His forehead was pierced by eight service studs, each representing fifty years of loyal duty to the Emperor. A pink scar cut from his right cheek to his chin, standing out against the supple sheen of his dark skin. Like the other Salamanders, his face and throat were covered with burns, each medal of honour intricately etched into his flesh. His dark eyes gazed solemnly out into the darkness, the weight of several hundred years of battle hung in that look. With a nod to himself, the captain replaced his helmet.

'Enough talk. Move our battle-brothers out.'



THE SPACE MARINES advanced more cautiously, sending out regular patrols to search for Eldar ambush sites. Ramesis was with Brother-Captain Nubean and Brother-Epistolary Zambias of the Chapter's library. They had been marching for half an hour when Zambias held up a hand and Nubean signalled a halt. Without a word the librarian took off his helm and stared up into the sky where the stars of the

galactic rim were scattered across the cloudless night like a fine dust. The librarian's face was gaunt, his bald head glistened with waxy sweat. His eyes were milky white with no pupils, as though he were blind, yet he gazed up into the heavens with a furrowed brow, as if searching for something. Ramesis saw a pale eldritch light playing around the psyker's eyes as he used his powers to scan the surroundings for other minds.

With a slow blink and a long exhalation, Zambias closed his mind once more. 'The Eldar have broken off their attack. They are moving further north,' he told Nubean and Ramesis.

'Then we advance quickly while they regroup!' Nubean barked, waving a hand forward to signal the surrounding squads to start moving again.

'Have you no clues as to the Eldar's intent?' Ramesis asked Zambias as they broke into a run.

'Their witchery is strong, as you know, brother-chaplain. I cannot penetrate their minds, I can only sense their presence. It leaves a foul stain upon the air, a corruption on the aura of this world. These lands belong to the Emperor, they abhor the presence of these vile aliens,' the librarian explained, his clenched fist showing his anger at the aliens' desecration of Slato.

'I have pondered upon this myself, brothers,' Nubean said. 'I have been in contact with the lieutenant in charge of the Imperial Garrison and there are a number of factors which puzzle me. I would welcome your guidance in these matters.'

'With our weapons we bring the Emperor's judgement; with our minds we bring his wisdom,' Zambias replied, putting his helmet back on.

'Three times the Eldar have launched a full frontal assault on the Imperial positions,' Nubean said. 'That is unusual. The Eldar are as fast as lightning on the plains, striking then disappearing as quickly. They know they are no match for massed guns, yet three times they have hurled themselves onto the tanks and squads of the Imperial Guardsmen.'

'I believe they are acting in haste,' Zambias answered after a moment's consideration. 'The force they left to waylay Ramesis was small, composed entirely of their so-called "Rangers", experts in infiltration, disruption and delaying tactics. Even the host they sent against us was not a large proportion of their warriors, if the auguries assessed their strength correctly. It seems they are concentrating everything they can spare on the portal and the humans defending it. Their usual strategy of hit and run would bleed us dry if we did not take the offensive, ensuring them a good chance of victory. Yet here they are, throwing their warriors into the teeth of the Imperial army. They are desperate to break through, that much I am certain.'

'What matter is it whether they are desperate or nonchalant? They will die under our bolters either way!' Ramesis spat, taking his bolt pistol from its holster and brandishing it fiercely at the horizon. 'If they choose to make themselves easier targets then we should be grateful. I have little stomach for fighting the Eldar. They slink and crawl and slither like serpents, never standing and fighting like honourable warriors. Their witchcraft is potent, their machines of war fast and manoeuvrable; it will be better for us that they forego such tactics to stand and fight for once.'

'That is true,' Nubean agreed with a nod. 'We fight for a just cause, for the Eldar cannot be allowed access to their infernal portal. If they reach their device they'll bring more of their kind to this world and slaughter the colonists, and it will be lost to the Emperor. We must ensure that does not happen.'

'Why do we not destroy the portal and end this matter immediately?' asked Ramesis.

'There is an agent of the Machine God in the Imperial Guard force,' replied Zambias. 'I believe he wishes it preserved for study.'

'Ach! The Machine God. Politics.' Ramesis's simple statement conveyed his contempt. 'I do not pretend to understand why we waste time with such matters. We fight, we kill, we are

victorious. That is what it means to be a Salamander.'

'And what would we be without our armour and our weapons, Ramesis?' Nubean gently chided the chaplain. 'You above all others know that we exist only to protect the Emperor's domains and his servants. If the Mechanicus wish to examine this thing, as foolish as it seems to us, it is our duty to protect them whilst they do so.'

As he pondered this, Ramesis cast a look at the mountains around him. The light of Slato's twin moons had not reached into the valley yet and everything was swathed in shadow. They were jogging easily through the long wild grass, their passage only broken by the odd clump of withered mountain trees or cluster of tumbled boulders.

'That is another curious matter here, brothers,' Nubean said, picking up on Ramesis's earlier words. 'The Eldar excel at the sneak attack, the hidden blow, but they forewarned the garrison of their approach. They sent them an ultimatum—allow access to their portal or be destroyed. Why would they give up the element of surprise, when perhaps they could have swept away the defences with a single conclusive assault?'

'Perhaps they wished to terrorise the guardsmen, in the hope that they would not have to fight at all?' Ramesis offered, not trying to hide his lack of faith in the courage of the Imperial Guard.

'Equally, an attack with total surprise might have swept aside all resistance and given them access to the reinforcements they desire,' Nubean countered, adjusting his right shoulder pad as he jogged along, so that it sat better on its actuators.

'Ramesis is correct,' Zambias said, pulling his force sword from its scabbard. Psychic energy flowed through the blade, causing faint blue flames to play along its length. 'It matters not what their devious scheme is. They will fall before the blade of the Emperor's anger all the same.'



THE SPACE MARINES reached the pickets of the Imperial Guard force without encountering any more Eldar, though twice Zambias informed them that an enemy psyker had tried to break through the Epistolary's psychic shield. The Imperial Guard were in poor shape. The charred hulls of both of their tanks sat smoking in the darkness. The bodies of the dead were lined up, their faces covered by helmets, in a line that stretched for thirty paces. Ramesis could see the thirty yards of killing ground which the Guardsmen had cleared in front of their line. It was scorched, pockmarked with craters and shell holes, yet there was no sign of any Eldar dead. Ramesis presumed that the enemy had taken them back when they had been forced to withdraw from the sheer weight of the Guard's short-range volleys of las-fire.

The few surviving Imperial Guard squads sat around campfires, their long greatcoats and peaked helmets ragged and stained from battle. Their lieutenant hurried through the darkness to greet the newcomers. His eyes were ringed with fatigue and stress and his dark blue tunic was unbuttoned. A bandage was wrapped around the thigh of his left leg, blood seeping from beneath it in a red stain across his white breeches. He saluted to Captain Nubean in the manner of his regiment, one finger to the peak of his cap.

'Lieutenant Raskil of the Fourth Levillian, seconded to the Adeptus Mechanicus on garrison duty,' he said. 'Praise the Immortal Emperor that you are here to save us.'

Nubean looked down at the officer, the tip of whose head only reached to the Space Marine's chest eagle.

'You are mistaken, lieutenant,' he told Raskil. 'We are not here to save you. We are here to protect the portal from the foul Eldar. Your survival is only important with regard to that mission.'

The lieutenant stepped back as if slapped, mouth gaping wide. Before he could say anything more, the hulking form of Brother Zambias was towering over him.

'Where is this alien artefact, lieutenant? I wish to examine it,' the librarian asked. The Imperial Guardsman was still taken aback by Nubean's reprimand.

'I'll, er... I'll take you there myself. Do you wish to rest and eat a little before we see it?' Raskil offered.

Ramesis felt his anger rising. This impudent human was suggesting their physical needs took priority over their mission objectives. He stomped towards the Lieutenant, but Nubean interposed himself, holding up a hand to halt Ramesis's approach.

'We do not require any sustenance yet, lieutenant,' the captain interjected swiftly. 'However, we must attend to the defence of this position before any other matters. Please detail your sergeants to work with my brothers. Your men can rest for the remainder of the night, my squads will stand watch until daybreak.'

'You realise that night here lasts for eighteen hours?' Raskil asked.

'We are aware of Slato's rotational cycle, lieutenant,' Nubean said, his voice betraying his confusion at the officer's inquiry.

'And your men are going to stand watch until daybreak, some ten hours away?' Raskil continued incredulously. 'I can detail some men for watch duty, it isn't a problem.'

That was too much for Ramesis. He stepped around Captain Nubean and stared down at Raskil.

'Your men require food and sleep. We do not!' Ramesis felt like he was stating the obvious. 'If your men do not receive these things, their combat performance is adversely affected. We have no such weakness. We can fight for a month on the proteins contained within our armour recycling systems alone. You also suffer from stress-related physical and mental disorders over protracted periods of conflict, which is why I will ignore these insults. Our brothers will stand watch. Please do not question the captain's wisdom again.'

Lieutenant Raskil gave a worried glance at the three giant Space Marines standing around him. Looking across the camp he

saw the other Space Marines moving into positions from which they could keep watch to the north and south, along the valley. He wasn't surprised to notice his own men giving the massive warriors a wide berth, moving out of their way when they approached.

'Follow me then. Magos Simeniz has been analysing the... the objective for several days,' he said finally, setting off to the rear of the encampment.



RASKIL LED Ramesis and the other Marines into a even, bowl-shaped depression which was surrounded on three sides by steep cliffs, just behind the eastern side of the ridge where the guardsmen had set up their defence. The artefact at its centre was instantly recognisable as Eldar in design. The obelisk stood roughly twice the height of a man and was constructed from a deep purple stone. Eldar runes were painted in gold leaf along its length. Delicate strands of silver wire hung from rods in the ground around the portal, tracing out a hexagram. The air was filled with a hissing sound, which was emitting from a square box, two foot across and covered in dials and valves, which was sat nearby and linked up to the wires by coils of cables. The whole area was lit by the flickering flames of three braziers placed in a triangle around the dell. As they strode towards the alien creation, a stooping robed figure shuffled into sight from behind the machinery.

'Ah, Raskil, there you—' the figure started, then halted as he noticed the Space Marines for the first time. As he turned to regard them, the flames illuminated the face beneath the heavy cowl of his robe. Parchment-like skin hung in fleshless folds from his cheeks and his back seemed permanently hunched. From his right eye socket protruded a strange optical device with several different sized lenses which slid back and forth as he adjusted his focus. His nose was also absent, an air hose

coiling from the middle of his misshapen face to a small cylinder at his belt.

‘Come, see this!’ Simeniz offered, beckoning to them with his right hand, from which protruded a number of small antennas. He led them to the far side of the analysis machine and pointed to one of the numerous screens showing a succession of sine waves and curving graphs. The Adeptus Mechanicus agent pulled a small plug from a receptacle implanted into the side of his forehead and plugged it into a matching socket in the machine, the wire linking him to the plug glistening with a thin sheen of blood. The screen which he had indicated began to change as the tech-priest chanted a low, almost sub-vocal, invocation. The outline of the artefact appeared in solid green lines and as the adept chanted faster, swirling orange dots began to form into concentric ovals that span in a seemingly arhythmic pattern around the centre of the monolith.

‘You see?’ Simeniz demanded, stabbing a finger at the screen with obvious excitement.

‘We do not understand the workings of this machine,’ Nubean said, looking blankly at the ever-moving image.

The tech-priest gave a snort of derision and flicked a switch which locked the moving shapes in place, before pulling the mind-plug from its socket.

‘That is a definite warp-coil energy wave,’ the tech-priest said slowly, as a patient adult would address a child. ‘Our suspicions were correct: this edifice is capable of opening a Warp gate, enabling objects to pass through. Rather large objects if my calculations are correct. However, there have been some anomalies. The wave signature is not consistent with any point of Warp-interface we are aware of. It is as if it led to somewhere that is part of the Warp, yet is separate from it.

‘Also, it has been increasing in magnitude since my arrival. I am certain that someone is trying to activate it remotely.’

‘Can you prevent that happening?’ Ramesis asked, looking up at the great obelisk. The construction seemed to

absorb the light from the braziers rather than reflecting it, staying in constant shadow. Being near to such an alien thing, with the scent of otherworldly evil hanging in the air, made Ramesis’s spine tingle with some preternatural sensation of foreboding.

‘I could potentially destabilise the Warp field, but that could prove catastrophic if I am incorrect,’ the tech-priest suggested, with a shrug of his slight shoulders.

‘Be prepared to do so if I give the order,’ Nubean said. ‘We will endeavour to preserve this portal intact for your study, but our orders are to prevent the Eldar from fully activating it. We will destroy it if necessary, for the lives of two hundred thousand colonists could be in danger.’

‘Colonists?’ Simeniz asked with a sneer. ‘There are always more colonists – but we might not find another specimen of this quality for another five centuries.’

‘If the Eldar reach this portal, then it will be lost to us anyway,’ Zambias said. The librarian held out his hands to either side and walked slowly towards the portal stone, gradually bringing his hands together in front of him as he did so.

‘I can feel evil in this place. Ancient, alien evil,’ he said, turning back to the group.

‘We will be ready for it,’ Ramesis answered confidently.



IT WAS STILL several hours before daybreak when the Eldar attacked again. Ramesis had been with Zambias and Nubean for the whole night, positioning their warriors and the Imperial Guard for the best defence. The bulk of the force was stationed watching the northern approaches, where the Eldar had attacked from before. However, Nubean had ordered Ramesis and a small contingent to guard the south, in case the Eldar used their swift skimmer vehicles to launch their attack from the other direction. There were forty-four other Space Marines, as well as some sixty Imperial Guardsmen, and Ramesis was feeling confident that they could hold out.

He was with Squad Lysonis when the first firing erupted to the north, on the right flank of the defenders.

The Imperial Guardsmen sent a steady stream of volleys into the darkness, the harsh white flare of their lasguns burning brightly against the dark. Sleek beams of blue energy struck back from the shadows, followed by a succession of flickering plasma bolts which impacted into the ground with blinding explosions. Ramesis's suit had automatically imposed a filter over his vision to stop his vision being impaired by the glaring light of the attacks, but he knew that the guardsmen would have difficulty seeing anything in the darkness. As he watched, a fist-sized star of energy shot from the gloom and impacted into the chest of a guardsman, flinging his ragged corpse a dozen yards across the ground. Ramesis could hear the bellowed orders of the Imperial Guard sergeants, and in the occasional seconds of near-silence his ears picked up the shrill whine of Eldar shuriken catapults tearing through the night air.

'We hold here. That may simply be a diversionary attack,' he told Lysonis, turning his attention away from the firefight that was raging a hundred paces to his right. Checking to his left, Ramesis saw the heat auras of several Eldar craft skimming forward slowly, silently stalking towards the Imperial position.

'Magnify,' he told his suit, and his field of vision suddenly zoomed in on the faint shimmering lines of three Eldar war machines. They flitted a couple of yards above the ground, dodging between the scattered rocks and trees. They were long and sleek, with a curved armoured canopy at the front and an exposed gun cradle to the back. Ramesis recognised them instantly as the craft he had been told the Eldar called Serpents or Vypers, something like that; swift two-man attack vehicles armed with a lethal heavy weapon. As they came closer, the sleek, menacing lines of the craft could be seen more clearly, gliding steadily towards the Imperial defenders.

There was no need for him to warn his brothers; he could see they were tracking the Eldar's progress as well. Taking a deep

breath to steady himself he pulled his bolt pistol and crozius from his belt and waited patiently for the aliens to get within range. A sudden glow from the slender weapon of the closest craft indicated a heat build-up, and a moment later a blue bolt of energy sliced out of the night, punching cleanly through the armour of Brother Kammia where he stood on the hillside fifty yards to Ramesis's right. The Space Marine stood there for a second as if nothing had happened, faint wisps of vapour steaming from the gaping hole through his torso. Then the warrior's legs folded under him and he fell to the ground, his armour clattering noisily as if suddenly empty.

The Space Marines reacted immediately, a lion's roar tearing the sky apart as they opened fire with their bolters in a mass volley of fire. Each bolt traced into the shadows on a tiny tail of flame, to explode a second later with a distinctive cracking noise. Ramesis watched the tiny eruptions spatter across the hull of the lead craft, shrapnel sent flying in all directions. As Ramesis switched his optics to normal view again, the Space Marine beside him, Brother Arthetis, braced his legs and brought his missile launcher to his shoulders. The Vypers were swinging past, the gunners swivelling their elegant weapons to direct their fire against the Space Marines. Arthetis swung at the waist to point the tubular missile launcher at the closest, before pulling back heavily on the trigger. A blossom of orange fire erupted from the back of the missile launcher. For a second it appeared that the missile had not seen its targets; its course would take it straight past the last Vyper. Then the spirit within the missile became aware of the aliens swooping past and with a small flicker of a guidance jet it altered course. A moment later the krak warhead exploded, turning the rearmost of the three craft into a rapidly expanding ball of flame which tumbled into the ground with another explosion.

The Space Marines tracked the surviving Vypers, continuing to fire their bolters. Ramesis saw one bolt impact into a control plane before detonating, shearing the fin off completely. Its stability lost, the

craft dived towards the ground and the chaplain saw the gunner lift his arms to shield his face a moment before the nose ploughed into the dirt. The skimmer's momentum sent the craft cartwheeling down the hillside, shards of curved armour flung in all directions. The last surviving Vyper flitted back into the shadows of the crags and disappeared from view.



THE BATTLE HAD raged for a couple of hours, the Eldar preferring to dart in and inflict some casualties before withdrawing back into the darkness, rather than mounting a full-scale assault. Such tactics made it almost impossible to judge the Eldar's numbers, but the shattered wrecks of two of their grav-tanks littered the ridgeline now, and Lysonis had reported over fifty of their dead found in the surrounding area. During the last assault Ramesis had been caught in a hail of fire from a shuriken catapult, an alien creation that could send a storm of razor-sharp discs slicing through their target. The chaplain's ancient armour had held firm, though, and a row of the monomolecular-edged discs spread in a neat line from just below his left shoulder to his right hip. When the battle was won he would have Techmarine Orlinia carefully remove them so that Ramesis could keep them as a memento of the battle. He would repaint the armour himself, however, and thank it for the protection it had given him.

It had been over an hour since the last attack and Captain Nubean, convinced by the lapse of time that this was not some kind of feint, had led his command squad and Squad Delphus after them, determined to harass them and stop them regrouping. He had been gone for perhaps a quarter of an Imperial hour now, having left Ramesis in charge of the remaining Imperial forces.

Those forces were much depleted. The Eldar attacks had been highly efficient; only twenty nine of the guardsmen and twenty-seven Space Marines were fit for

fighting. Ramesis knew that many of his fallen battle-brothers would fight on if asked, but it was imperative that they allowed their enhanced bodies every opportunity to heal themselves so that they might fight at full effectiveness later when they were really needed. Most of the troopers who had fallen were dead, shredded by shuriken, blown apart by starcannon plasma bolts or torn in half by high-powered laser weapons. Ramesis was looking at one corpse in particular, that of a young corporal whose face looked so serene and at peace. Strange, Ramesis thought in a detached fashion, considering his legs and half his spine have been vaporised. Then Ramesis's comm-link chimed and the body was instantly forgotten.

'I'm returning with some of the Eldar,' he heard Nubean reporting.

The connection was cut before he had a chance to reply, but Ramesis was delighted that the captain had captured some of the filthy aliens so that they could be interrogated as to their plans and the strength of their army. It was not long before Ramesis caught sight of the returning Space Marines. Nubean was striding purposefully up the hill, accompanied by Zambias. His bodyguard was behind him, and between their massive torsos Ramesis caught occasional glimpses of the alien captives.

All three wore long flowing robes and tall, jewel-encrusted helms. Their slight forms seemed emaciated next to the immense physiques of the Space Marines, but the aliens were slightly taller. Intricately shaped Eldar runes hung from their garments on fine threads, swaying gently as they walked forward. The one in the centre was the most ornamented and Ramesis realised with a start that this must be one of the legendary Farseers, the powerful psykers said to command the Eldar. The other two were Warlocks; he had encountered them before, powerful battle-witches who were obviously serving as some kind of honour guard for the Farseer. All three moved with an effortless grace, easily keeping pace with the Space Marines despite the long strides of the captain and librarian. Nubean and

Zambias were about ten yards away now, and Ramesis could clearly make out the three aliens following them. Something was nagging at the back of his mind, but before he could work out what was amiss Nubean was stood directly in front of him.

‘Come, brother! We have matters to discuss, and urgently,’ Nubean said without formality, already striding past Ramesis in the direction of the portal.

It was then that Ramesis realised that the Eldar were not bound in any way at all, and with a shock he noticed they still carried their weapons: shuriken pistols in finely-crafted holsters and long swords carried in scabbards hung with many tassels and runes.

‘What devilry is this?’ the chaplain demanded, sighting his pistol at the Farseer. It was obvious that the Space Marines were under some kind of foul influence of the Eldar’s psychic powers.

‘Calm yourself, Ramesis!’ Nubean shouted back, putting himself between the chaplain and his target. ‘The situation has changed. Put down your weapon.’

‘Weak-minded fool!’ Ramesis hissed, pointing his bolt pistol at the captain. ‘This is some cursed Eldar mind-trick!’

Zambias once more stepped between the chaplain and captain, laying his heavily-gauntleted hand on Ramesis’s pistol.

‘There is no trickery here, brother,’ the librarian assured him calmly. ‘We are both free from influence.’ Zambias’s helmet was hung from his belt and Ramesis could see his eyes were normal, betraying no sign of mental powers being used.

Ramesis hesitated for a moment and studied the librarian’s face. Seeing nothing but the honourable and honest face he had come to know and respect over the last few years, he took a reluctant step back, lowering his pistol. The three Eldar strode past without even glancing at the chaplain, acting as if nothing at all had happened. Their alien haughtiness infuriated Ramesis but he managed to keep his anger in check – for the meantime.

THE PORTAL WAS being guarded by Brothers Amadeus, Xavier and Joachim, and they eyed the group of Eldar accompanying Nubean very suspiciously. Raskil’s men and the other Space Marines were left watching the valley, in case this was a subtle ploy to lure the Emperor’s servants into some false sense of confidence and security. As the group entered the natural bowl containing the Eldar artefact, Magos Simeniz looked up from where he was adjusting the wire hexagram around the portal, his jaw dropping almost comically when he noticed the nature of his visitors.

‘What are they doing here?’ he demanded, stepping protectively in front of his analytical engine. The Farseer took a pace forward and raised his hand in some kind of alien gesture, his fingers splaying open and then closing into a half-fist. When he spoke, the Eldar’s voice was musical, every syllable and sound perfectly formed and intoned, spoken without hesitation.

‘I am here to deactivate the opening-ward, the device of power you call a portal,’ the Farseer waved an arm hung with several thick golden bracelets in a fluid gesture towards the obelisk.

‘This is trickery! You will open the gateway to your fiendish home and bring more of your warriors,’ Ramesis claimed, striding to stand next to Simeniz.

‘Interference would not please us,’ the Farseer said gently with an inclination of his head. ‘The voices of our home and forefathers have sent us here, the runes guiding my dancing path to your presence. There is one who comes here, born in nightmare and feeding on fear. He is Kha-rehk, leader of the Fanged Maw. He comes and slaughters you all, sating his thirst with your peoples’ essence.’

Ramesis stared at the Eldar leader, fixing his gaze on the two green, gem-like ovals he assumed served as eyepieces in the helmet. It was impossible to tell what the Farseer was feeling or thinking; the alien’s bowed head could be a demand or acquiescence. Captain Nubean removed his helmet as he joined the chaplain, Magos Simeniz scurrying close behind. The captain’s eyes were troubled and

Ramesis could see that the responsibility he held was weighing heavily on his shoulders.

‘Everything has been explained. Well, I think I understand,’ Nubean told the others. ‘A band of Eldar renegades are trying to use this portal to attack the colonists. This Farseer has arrived to close the portal completely, so that it can never be used again. We must act quickly to sever this bridge between realms.’

‘No!’ Simeniz cried suddenly, a crazed look in his natural eye. ‘They’re trying to keep it a secret from us! They want to hide their wonderful technology from the Machine God!’ With a hiss the tech-priest launched himself at the Farseer, his fingers spread like claws. Ramesis reached out to grab the deranged adept but the Farseer acted more swiftly. The Eldar psyker made a short gesture with the fingers of his raised hand and Simeniz’s head was surrounded by a faint rippling nimbus of yellow light, stopping him in his tracks. Zambias had taken a step forward, his hand on the hilt of his force sword, but no sooner had he moved than one of the Warlocks was barring his path, a glowing Witchblade brandished in its hands.

‘Release him!’ Nubean demanded and the Farseer flicked its fingers again with an almost bored shrug. Simeniz fainted to the ground. As Ramesis stooped to one knee to check he was alive, the tech-priest opened his eye and groaned sleepily.

‘It told me things,’ Simeniz whispered. ‘Showed me a glimpse of the portal. It was wonderful.’ The tech-priest struggled to his feet and gazed wide-eyed at the Farseer, who had turned its attention to the portal itself.

‘What do you care about our colonists?’ Ramesis demanded of the Eldar.

‘Nothing,’ the psyker admitted with a dismissive wave of a long-fingered hand. ‘More of your warriors discover the butchery and seek answers. You stumble across our Craftworld as she drifts peacefully through the stars. You do not understand what has happened and the guilt for the spilling of blood is laid upon us. Your warships gather and attack us.

We destroy all of them, but many of my kin die doing so. We wish to avoid this outcome. We did not wish to fight against you. If the Dark Kin break free from the webway we will need the strength of both our forces to turn them back.’

‘How do you know this?’ Ramesis asked, still convinced that the Eldar were trying to trick them somehow.

‘How do you know that you are awake? Or even alive?’ the Farseer said.

‘Speak plainly!’ Ramesis demanded.

‘We waste time!’ the Eldar leader snapped back. ‘I will gladly leave you all to die in the most agonising manners, if you would kindly leave assurances that my kin are not responsible for your deaths or the eradication of your intrusive little dunghill of a town. I must close the webway arch and I must be doing it now!’

The Farseer raised its hand and pointed at the portal, chanting softly in its own strange, melodic language. As Ramesis watched, the analytical engine gave a shriek. Simeniz leapt to man the status displays, his fingers working furiously at a series of switches and dials.

‘The... the portal’s beginning to open,’ he said in an awed whisper. All eyes turned towards the stone. A dark corona of energy was forming around the obelisk, tendrils of white power crawling along its surface. A dull hum filled the air and as they watched the silver wire of Simeniz’s analysis matrix began to melt.

‘Treachery!’ Ramesis bellowed, bringing up his bolt pistol and firing at the Farseer. There was a flare of psychic energy and the bolt dropped to the ground, unexploded. Behind the Farseer, Ramesis saw Zambias exchanging sword blows with the Warlock in front of him. Amadeus, Xavier and Joachim fired their bolters at the other Warlock, but the Eldar side-stepped neatly past the volley and struck out, its Witchblade slicing across Amadeus’s chest with sparks of psychic power.

Ramesis pressed his thumb to the power stud of his crozius and turned back to the Farseer. Suddenly, the chaplain’s mind exploded. He felt quicksilver shards of mental energy piercing his soul. It seemed as if the universe itself was

shrieking in his ears and light as bright as the sun blinded him. Gritting his teeth, Ramesis forced his eyes to focus on the Farseer, who was still standing calmly in the middle of the hollow, his attention fixed on the portal, one hand still outstretched towards it.

‘Vulkan give me strength!’ Ramesis cried, throwing off the Farseer’s mental attack with a sudden surge of willpower. Ramesis was two strides from the Eldar when it snapped its head towards him like a mantis spying its prey. The Farseer opened its right hand and its Witchblade leapt from the sheath across its back and settled into his grip. Ramesis brought his crozius around in a vicious back-handed strike, smashing the power weapon into the alien’s head. Gems scattered across the ground as the Farseer reeled. Ramesis brought his arm back for another attack, but the Eldar reacted quickly, spinning on its heel to deliver a double-handed blow with its Witchblade. Ramesis thought the Eldar had missed for a moment until he brought his arm forward to strike again with the crozius. In a moment of disbelief, Ramesis noticed that his right arm stopped just above the wrist. Glancing down in a detached fashion, the chaplain saw his crozius lying on the ground, his gloved hand still gripping its haft.

The Witchblade slashed out again and Ramesis dived to one side, the alien weapon smashing across his left shoulder pad. Sparks fountained into the air from the severed auto-actuators as Ramesis rolled and regained his feet. The Farseer seemed to glide towards the chaplain, advancing without walking, the Witchblade blazing with power. The Eldar took a wide-stepped stance, its robes billowing in a psychic gale of power, and brought the blade in a slow circle around its head. Ramesis noticed that one of the eye-jewels had been shattered and he could see part of the Farseer’s face. An almond shaped-eye stared back at him with contempt in its gaze. As the Farseer advanced, the eye’s yellow iris began to glow, filling up with tiny sparks of energy until it was a small star of white light.

With a thunderous explosion of energy, the Farseer was knocked down onto one

knee. Behind the sprawling Eldar stood Xavier, Ramesis’s crozius gripped in both hands. The Space Marine struck down again and again, battering the Farseer’s head and back until the alien stopped moving, its blood seeping into the dirt. Looking around, Ramesis saw that both Warlocks were dead too. Brother Amadeus was on his back, Zambias helping him hold in the organs that were trying to spill from the massive slash through his chest bone. Simeniz was cowering on the ground, sobbing gently, covering his eyes. Nubean strode over and grabbed the back of the tech-priest’s robes in one hand and lifted him off the ground.

‘Stop the portal opening!’ he demanded, hurling Simeniz towards the logic machine.

The portal-stone was glowing white-hot with energy. A cold wind seemed to emanate from its surface causing the braziers to flicker madly. The tech-priest set to work, while Ramesis strode to where Xavier was standing over the Farseer, alien blood dripping from the crozius arcanum in his hands.

‘This is a good omen, Brother!’ Ramesis grinned, pointing towards the crozius. ‘The Emperor has obviously marked you as special. When we return to Nocturne I will enter your name into the Novitiate of the Promethean Cult. You will make a fine chaplain one day.

‘Thank you, brother. I pray to live up to your expectations,’ Xavier replied, the honour shining in his eyes.

Ramesis clapped his left hand on the young Space Marine’s shoulder pad and looked at the stump of his other arm. Already his genetically-modified blood had clotted and stopped the bleeding, his power armour releasing pain-numbing elixirs into the nerves around the injury. When they returned to the fortress-monastery, the Master of the Forges would fit him with an artificial hand. Such prosthetics were common amongst the Salamanders. There would be no shame in it.

‘I think I’m too late,’ Ramesis heard Simeniz mutter.

All eyes turned to the tech-priest where he stood hunched over the analyser.

'What did you say?' Nubean demanded, his dark eyes narrowed.

'I'm too late...' Simeniz repeated, pointing at the portal. The white energy had formed into a swirling ring of power many paces across, a purplish shadow staining its centre. The air was filled with a piercing whining noise, somehow loud but also just at the edge of hearing at the same time. Without any order being given, the Space Marines began to back away from the alien artefact, taking up a position on the crest of the rise. Captain Nubean was shouting over the comm-net, demanding all squads to assemble on the hill.

With a crack louder than thunder the portal yawned open, creating a massive oval of pure blackness that stretched three dozen yards across the whole width of the depression. Within the blackness of the void there blinked cold, distant stars. Nothing happened for several heartbeats, then suddenly the renegades burst from the ellipse of energy. Gunfire flashed out of nowhere and more Eldar leapt into view, each of their rifles spewing a hail of deadly crystal splinters. More Eldar riding midnight-black jet bikes covered in scything blades flashed into existence, their screaming engines sending them racing past the startled humans. The Space Marines and Imperial Guardsmen opened fire as more and more evil creatures slid into existence. The skin of these Eldar was pale to the point of being white, contrasting harshly with the black of their armour, which was made of flexible plates festooned with glittering blades. Hooks and barbs hung from chains around their wrists, loins and necks, and many of them wore extravagantly coloured crests on their high-fluted helmets.

Watching as the dark portal spat forth a sleek anti-grav vehicle packed full of howling warriors, Ramesis knew at the last that the alien Farseer had been right. Their force could not hold against the alien host on its own. The war engine glided slowly forward, menacing in its calmness. The creatures aboard it brandished cruel curved and serrated blades, and fired pistols indiscriminately into the mass of Imperial servants before

them. The exotic cannon mounted on the prow of the renegades' craft spat a ball of dark energy at the Space Marines, slicing easily through the armour of Brother Lastus. More and more warriors leapt through into the world, accompanied by packs of alien beasts which had no skin, their flesh and muscles clearly visible in the light of the constant gun fire. With ear-splitting howls the hunting pack bounded up the slope, their fanged jaws and clawed feet tearing a bloody path through the Imperial Guardsmen. More skimmers were sliding into view, bearing a seemingly endless stream of depraved and vicious warriors.

Firing his bolt pistol at the charging aliens, Ramesis knew a fear like he had never experienced before. If their forces had been combined with the original Eldar force, without being weakened by days of fighting each other, they would have been able to stem the tide of renegades pouring through the breach in reality. Now the servants of the Emperor stood alone. Ramesis knew that they were doomed; their only hope of victory had been shattered by his own hatred and inflexibility.

Determined that he would not die alone, Ramesis snatched the powersword clenched in the hand of Malesti, who lay dead in the dust. The hollow was full of the aliens' corpses, yet more and more seemed to spill forth into the battle. Screaming with rage, the chaplain charged into the centre of the throng. Ramesis was surrounded by their warriors as he hacked blindly left and right, felling an enemy with each blow. The whining of anti-grav engines was deafening and the chaplain was knocked to one knee by the downblast of something large sweeping overhead. The noise of guns and blade-on-blade swirled around him, accompanied by a cacophony of screams which were suddenly drowned out by a deafening bellow of inhuman rage. He was hemmed in on all sides by shadowy warriors, his armour rent and torn from the blows of his enemies, his real enemies. As the darkness closed in on him the last sight he had was of their thin faces laughing with cruel glee. ●

BASILISK

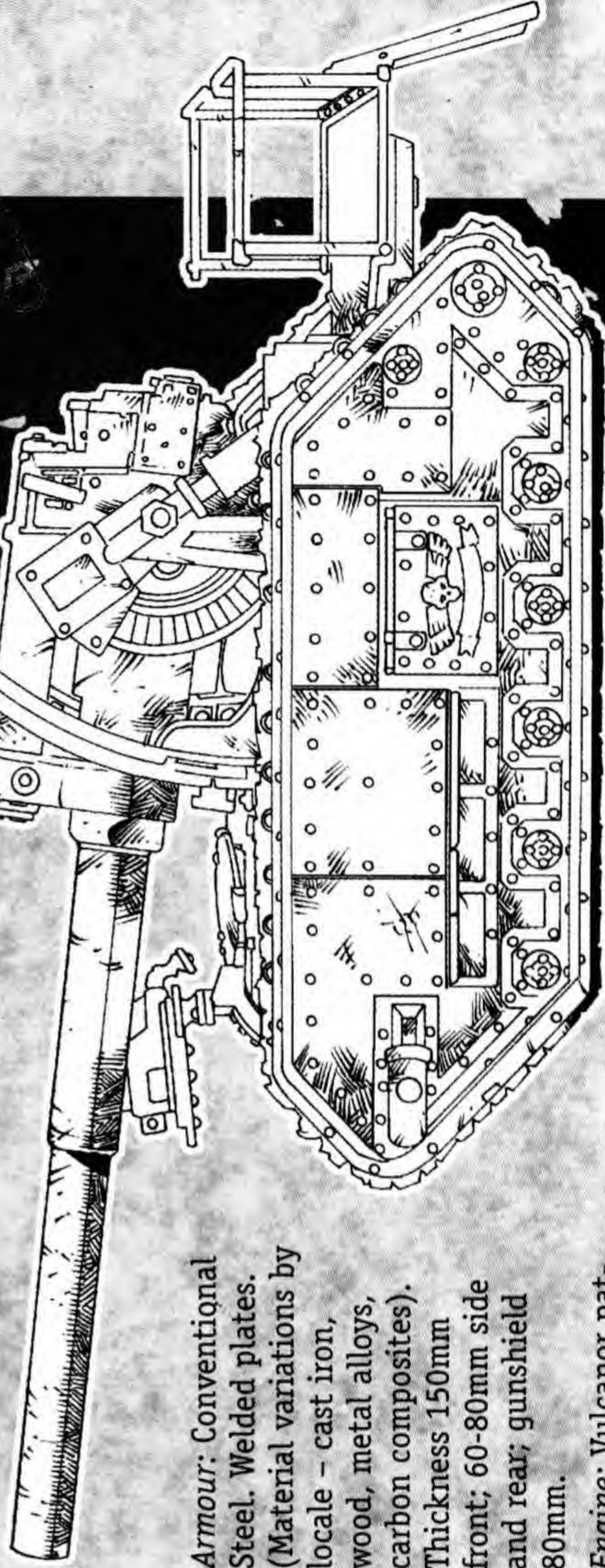
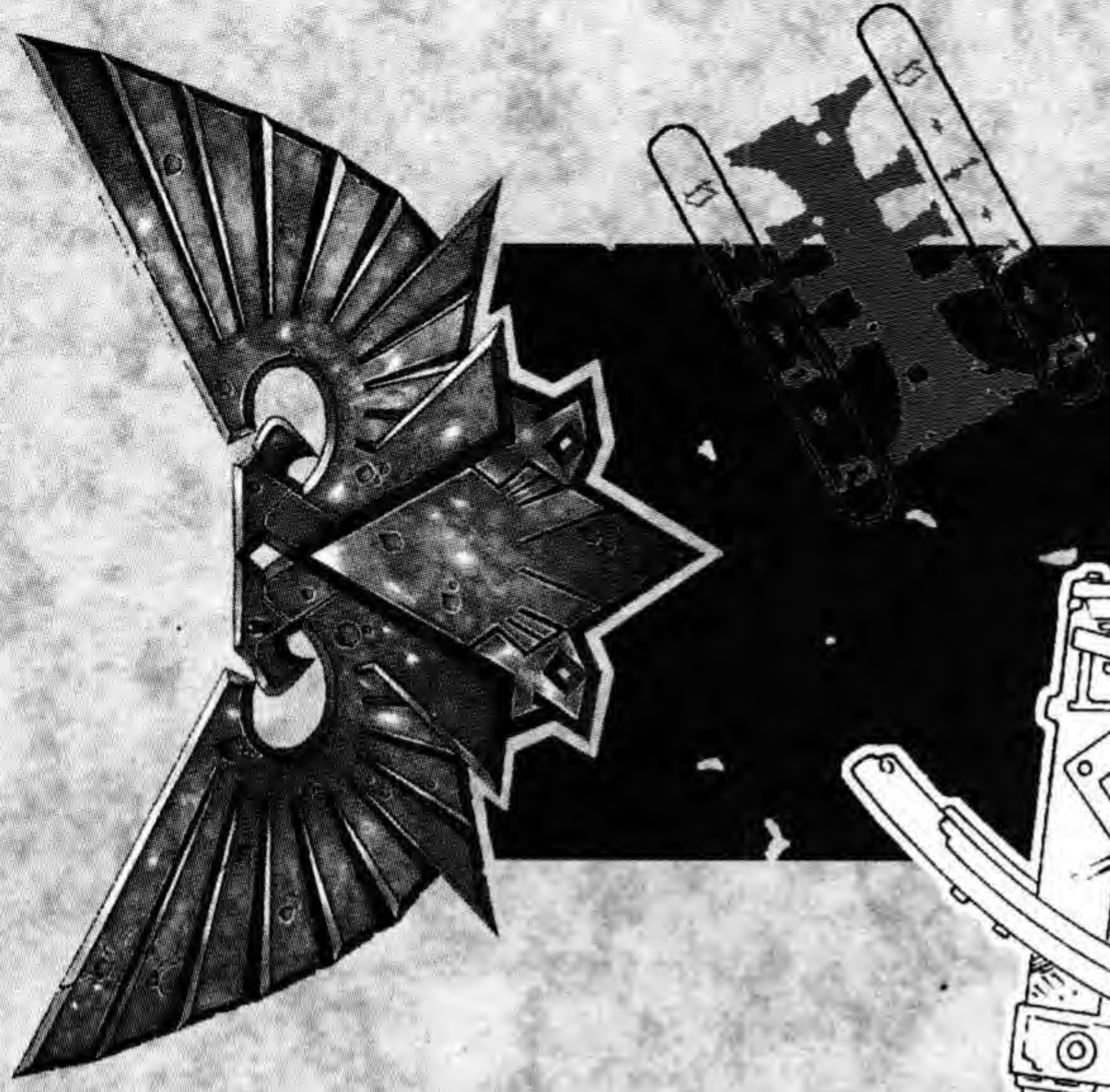
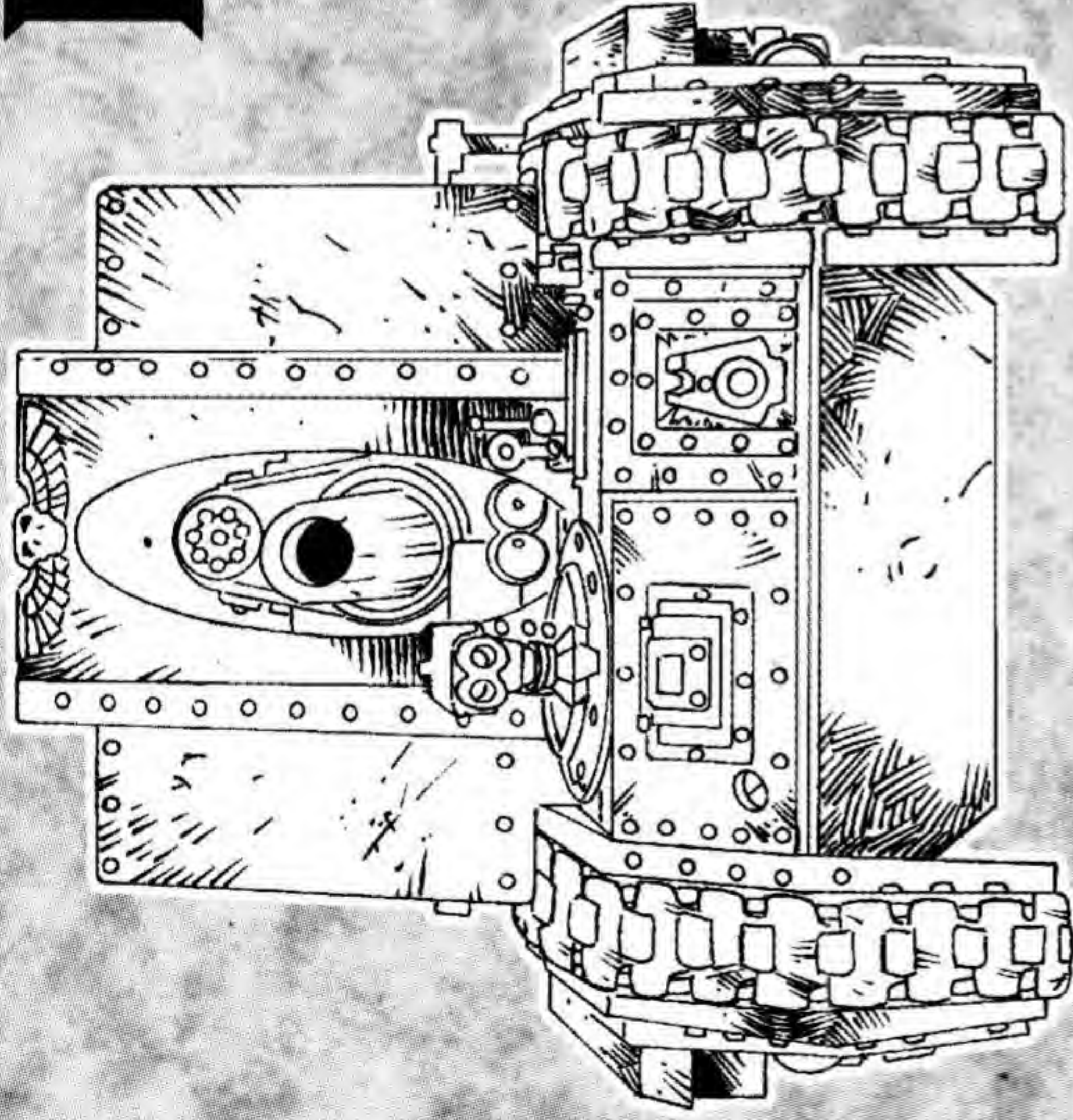
SELF PROPELLED GUN

Crew: 4

Driver, commander, gunner, loader.

Mass: 40 tonnes approx. (Variations due to local materials.)

Variants: No gunshield; enclosed fighting compartment. Increased external ammunition storage. Additional 'spaced' armour, bulldozer blades, recoil dampners, muzzle brakes and flash suppressors.



Armour: Conventional Steel. Welded plates. (Material variations by locale - cast iron, wood, metal alloys, carbon composites). Thickness 150mm front; 60-80mm side and rear; gunshield 80mm.

Engine: Vulcanor pattern, type XVI twin coupled rotary bio-gas power units developing up to 800 hp.

AMMUNITION

Internal Magazine: 18 rds ammunition and charges. Time-fused High Explosive, fragmentation casing.

Less commonly issued: Smoke. Illumination Flare.

Incendiary shell - Oxy-Phosphor gel core.

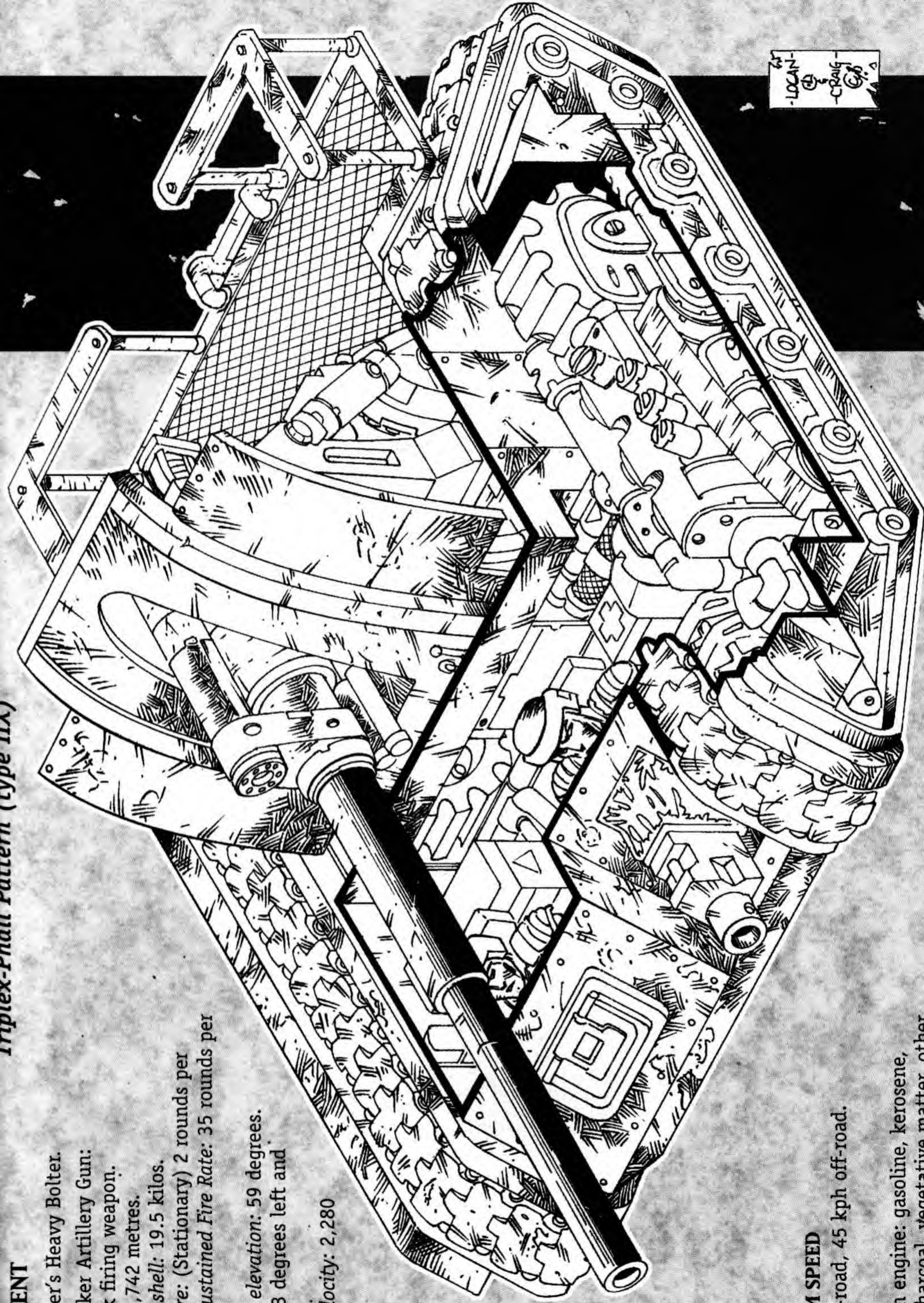
Diamantine tipped armour defeating round.

Heavy Bolter: Standard mass-reactive bolts. 300 rounds.

ARMAMENT

Commander's Heavy Bolter.
 Earth Shaker Artillery Gun:
 5.2" quick firing weapon.
 Range: 15,742 metres.
 Weight of shell: 19.5 kilos.
 Rate of Fire: (Stationary) 2 rounds per minute. Sustained Fire Rate: 35 rounds per hour.
 Maximum elevation: 59 degrees.
 Traverse: 3 degrees left and right.
 Muzzle velocity: 2,280 fps.

MAXIMUM SPEED
 60kph on-road, 45 kph off-road.
FUEL
 Multi-burn engine: gasoline, kerosene, alcohol, charcoal, vegetative matter, other.





'I'M GONNA DIE,' Knife-Edge Liz moaned, staring at her distorted reflection in the blood pooled at her side. 'I'm gonna die in this stinking hole.'

Her face was pale, the scar tissue of countless wounds now unnoticeable in its fading pallor. Her hair was matted with blood and her dark eyes glazed, irises unable to maintain their focus on even the closest objects. The ancient, rusted air duct around her was moaning and sighed like the lungs of some great beast, like she was trapped within the pumping vessels of a giant. A rush of chill air welled up through another tunnel behind her, thrusting siphoned air all about her, cooling her fever, then rushing away on its journey through other parts of Hive Primus.

Liz gazed down at herself, at the wrecked combat suit which she had pulled down to hang lifelessly around her waist. She wore her gang colours underneath. They clung to her with a combination of sweat and blood – life's vital ingredients, like the filtered air that swirled around the Hive, slipping away with pulsing regularity.

Liz rolled over and pulled herself forwards again to the edge of the mesh grille set in the floor. The sirens had stopped howling some hours ago. The Uphive security systems had plainly got over their initial surprise at her arrival. A tangle of wires trailing from the combat suit caught on a jagged metal edge, somewhere in the dim-blue darkness behind her.

'Damn it...' Liz sighed. She pulled roughly at the cables. They tore suddenly and starting spurting a thin chemical mist around the tunnel. Pneumatic coolant turned part of the wall to ice, the frozen nitrogen-spewing pipe spinning perilously close to her left leg. Before she had a chance to try and grapple with the cable, the arcane suit's dying mechanisms stepped in. The cable self-repaired and the gas stopped hissing. As the static-white haze settled, Liz returned her gaze to the grille.

Below her, a vaulting fresco-covered corridor revealed the hourly happenings of the uphive denizens. These were nothing like the people Liz had grown up with in the Underhive. She lay mere yards above a breed of people intent on her destruction, who thought her to be no more than a base animal. These nobles and their ladies wore soft cloth, not the scavenged pieces of



Rat in the Walls

by Alex Hammond

armour and mesh that could be scrounged to afford some protection. A gentleman in a brightly coloured silken robe strode past. His hand rested gingerly on a small, leathery ape-like creature, naked except for a steel face mask which guarded passers by from its vicious jaws. A woman in a translucent dress with a trail twice her length passed next. A huge, studded mail collar led up to her neck, where it was incorporated into an enormous lacquered hair escutcheon.

Liz marvelled at all she saw. The people moved and gestured with wide flamboyant strokes, they let their eyes wander to observe strangers, they congregated in open places, they spoke loudly rather than whispered in hushed tones. They did things that could bring about their death in the Underhive. Men and women paraded their affections in public. Much of their clothing revealed vital body parts that would, were this Deep Town or the Sump Hole, beckon assailants and encourage their blades and gunfire.

Liz rolled onto her back. 'These people are insane... and I'm dying among them,' she whispered and fell unconscious.



LIZ DRAGGED HERSELF awake. She could feel her arms and legs but could not make them move. She attempted to focus on something in the duct, latch onto some thing to steady her spinning head. Like a whirling vortex, like the gaping maw of Chaos, the roof above her twisted and spiralled, snickered and creaked. The weight of the hive was too much. It would collapse, crush her and all those below, everyone the entire ten miles down.

'No,' Liz moaned to herself. She knew these were just delusions, fears unchecked, but they would not stop.

Something sighed in the clammy darkness around her. The soft glow of the stolen combat suit's power cells ebbed; flickered; waned some more. Liz reached wearily for the small medi-pack lying at her side. She'd torn it open when she first staggered into the duct, blood flooding from an open wound. The hypos helped to coagulate, the pills reduced the pain and the staples did

their best to keep her innards where they belonged. Fever or no fever, these things were running thin. The bag was empty; the life support in the suit almost flat. To sleep was to die. But it would be painful, slow.

Let death take as long as it must, Liz thought, but damn the pain.

'I need some drugs,' she said aloud, her voice a croak.

Liz wound the suit's coils around her waist. Their small warmth was some help against death's cold. The rubber hissed as it pressed against her bleeding side. The shreds wrapped around her, Liz crawled slowly, like a cat bloated on sump rats. Her legs and arms shook with every move. Sweat ran from her body.

Dehydration. She wiped her hand across her face as she crawled, and tasted the salt and iron. Vital fluids. The dawning pain was intensifying, like a thousand steel spines protruded from her bones every time she placed a limb on the ground. Was she sweating blood now? Had the fever penetrated so deep that her heart was seeping life now? The noise in her fog-bound head intensified. The rush of static, buzzing as though every synapse was burning out, flaring like match heads, popping like overloaded transformers.

The dim light flickered, reflected from a slowly rotating fan set in the roof of the tunnel. Ancient dust hung in dirty stalactites. The floor was suddenly cold and jagged under her hands: another grate. Liz peered down. Quarters. Rich tapestries, colours so bright they burnt her retinas. A vast, solid table, dark as midnight. The vaulted ceiling; a thirty foot drop. Too far.

The pain kicked up another notch and Liz screamed. She wept. The drugs would run out, and she would die. Perhaps the fall was worth it? Perhaps it would end the pain quickly?

She struggled with her combat knife. The shakes intensified. She gripped the blade handle tighter, hoping her remaining strength would be enough to wrest control of the quivering knife tip as she tried to place it close to the grate's screws. Her hand slipped and the blade scored a jagged scar out of the ancient metal with a screech like a sump-rat thrown onto a campfire.

Liz jerked her body, rammed the blade under the mesh and kicked at it with her foot. The blade snapped backwards, part

embedding itself in her boot. The grate flipped open. Liz pulled at the knife. She was uncertain if it had sunk into her flesh. The combat suit's boots were light, designed for speed, so they afforded little protection. Liz had no time to investigate. She leaned forwards, her plan knitting together, despite the fever.

The slowly rotating extraction fan above her head paced its circles. Liz jammed it still with the knife. Uncoiling the combat suit's life wires, Liz lashed them to the stilled blades of the fan above her. Slowly, she leant forwards over the drop to the room below, the ebony table below her. No one was visible in the room, no obvious security system was in place.

With a sudden motion, Liz dropped forwards, then jerked to a halt like a marionette, her strings – the cables from the combat suit – pulling taught behind her to break her fall. She swayed six feet from the table, the last of her blood rushing to her head.

Liz wriggled from those parts of the suit that held her, slick, dripping, until she lay on the table. Her cocoon swayed slowly from the hole above her. She lay there for a moment, red and green with the liquids from her body and the suit. She left hand and foot prints on the table as she crawled to the edge and fell further. The room's floor was like ice beneath her feet; its cross hatched steel bit into her bare feet. In the Underhive, you never removed your boots, it was a cardinal sin. Underhivers who wanted to live slept with their boots on.

The wall to her left was free of tapestries, and covered instead with antique weapons. Liz removed a three-pointed blade, and staggered forwards to the nearest door.

Sleeping quarters. A lush bed with dark red cloth hanging about it covered most of the floor space. A giant insect, the size of a man's hand, hummed softly in a large gilded cage in the far corner of the room. Its multi-faceted eyes reflected her bloodied, near naked form back at her a hundred times as she staggered across the floor. An adjoining room, white with backlit tiles, stretched out in front of her. It was small, near empty except for a steel hose and a wall mirror that opened to reveal a series of pneumatic drawers. Liz flicked at each of these, letting the cool air of their opening hisses wash over her face. It did

little to help. The pain was intensifying. Her legs turned to rubber and gave way. Liz grabbed hold of the nearest open drawer as she went down.

Pills and hyposprays covered her prone form in a rain of brightly coloured pebbles. She turned her head to one side, fighting all the way. It was as though her spine was soldered to the floor. She tried to reach for one of the pills, it didn't matter which, but she fell short, her arms weak. Powerless, she saw the bright lights above her head intensify. And fell into blackness.



ABOVE HER a light buzzed, hygiene white. This was not the afterlife. The light was the length of her body, long and sharp-cornered. Liz could only part-open her eyes; whatever was in her system was making even the slightest movement an effort. She became aware of a gas mask pulled across her face, its copper base hard against her flesh. The air being filtered in was sweet, perfumed. When she breathed, her side no longer ached. Someone had been in there, fixed the ribs. She lay on a bed, her bloodied gang colours replaced by a blinding white robe. A series of hypo sprays and operating equipment were set out by the bed.

Liz could not move her head. Braced or drugged, she was not capable of scanning the room. But she knew without looking there was someone in the room with her. They were good, but the near-silent movements of their clothing betrayed their presence. Someone was observing her, watching her, concealed by her incapacity and the regular grinding from the medical equipment about her. She felt naked without a piece in her hand. The figure stirred and moved about the recesses of her vision in the corner of the room. Something warm pinched into her arm and spread about her body, dragging her eyes shut.

The medi-crib droned its incessant rhythm, its pulsing bladders and hissing pistons like the staccato of an autogun peppering the walls of an Underhive bar. The Underhive wound around Liz, twisting and arching, pulling her back.

Liz stood knee-deep in sump waters, the warm oily liquid spreading throughout her

body, the brief pinch of the hypo spray at her side.

'You'll need to overhaul those lungs if she's going to survive beyond the week.' A voice echoing at the side of her head, like steel ringing against a structural support.

Liz was not standing but floating in the sump, bobbing lethargically.

'Some butcher has been at her. Most of this scarring is from poor sutures. I don't know how they could still use those medi-staples. We have fibre tape ten years old that'd do a better job,' another voice bubbled up from the sump.

'Who's there?' Liz asked.

'She's stirring, Althar. Give her another hypo of anaesthetic,' the steel voice replied.

The machine drummed out a heartbeat. The water beneath her stirred and Liz sunk beneath it.



HOW YOU GOING, boss?' Liz was sitting around a camp-fire lit in a burnt out artillery shell, deep in the Underhive. 'Boss?'

The smell of fire-seared concrete filled the air. Dark shadows were cast from broken buttresses and twisted supports. Liz looked up from the warm flames to the face of a woman she hardly recognised. Thick purple dreads, rich brown muscles like iron, arms as thick as a structural girder. It was Bekka.

'You're dead-' Liz said.

'Don't think so,' Bekka smiled.

'-or I'm dreaming.'

'What do you mean? Dead?' Bekka scratched at the ground in front of her with a foot long, stainless-steel combat knife. She traced a skull and crossbones.

'We were ambushed. Everyone killed,' Liz said, feeling awkward in the light medical shift she wore. She pulled its edges to cover her bare feet.

'You?'

'No.' Liz could smell harsh disinfectants and sweet anaesthetics. 'I'm dying now, though. Uphive.'

'You gone Uphive? You're up there with the rat nobles?' Bekka flicked the knife into the ground, between the skull's cross-hatched eyes.

'I went there to kill the men who set us up.'

'You get 'em?'

'Yes. Aldus Harkon.'

'Harkon? Never liked him. Glad you got him Liz.' Bekka stood and stretched her back. She began to walk away from the fire. 'Even if you don't get the others, you've done a good job, girl. Sounds like you've revenged us pretty good.'

'Yeah, I guess so,' Liz said, watching her friend disappear into the darkness.



YOU GUESS WHAT, my dear?' Liz opened her eyes. A tall, lean man, with brutal but charming features, leaned over her. He was scar-free, with eyes older than his skin suggested. She now lay in the four poster bed, its soft mattress cradling her. Liz dragged an arm down the white gown and pulled a sheet up over her.

'I wouldn't concern yourself with all that fuss,' the man said turning away from her to examine a holo-projector, 'I've seen your insides.'

Liz could only make out small details in the room around her. To gaze too long was a strain. A dull pain behind her eyes forced her to take it slowly. The rise and fall of the machine beside her occasionally jostled the fluids and sedatives suspended from a wire frame. Their shiny brass exteriors rattled, sending small tremors down the metal cords bolted to the body plugs in her arm. The man examined the readings and flicked through a pad of reports, written on real paper. 'Says here that you're doing well. That's hardly surprising: my doctor is a genius when it comes to rejuvenation.'

'Rejuvenation?' Liz murmured.

'Yes. A complete overhaul.'

Liz touched her face, gingerly at first. 'My scars-'

'Scars, lungs, blood, liver - the whole system. You've brushed up quite nicely for such a ragged piece-of-work.'

Liz brought her hand round to her neck. The mark from the near fatal blow Alquath the Viper had dealt her in a duel remained.

'Couldn't leave you without one reminder of where you came from. It has a certain

rugged appeal to it, I think,' the man said without turning around.

'You know who I am?' Liz said, examining the hard copper-coloured wires that ran from the heavy medical systems to a socket set in her arm.

'Oh yes,' the man replied his back still turned to her. 'I know you. The terrorist from the deeps, who's been picking off the Emperor's good children from air ducts. Yes, I know who you are.'

'You didn't kill me.' Liz returned her attention to the man. He was dressed in an elegant suit, made from a material that changed from a deep purple to a rose colour as he shifted. A robe set over it trailed to the ground around him billowing on the floor.

'No.' The man turned to face her. 'No. I didn't kill you. I must say, it is not every day that one finds a half-naked woman lying bloodied in their en suite. At first I thought you were a threat by some enemy. I thought you were Ursula, truth be told. You're about her height and build.'

'That counts for an explanation in these parts?' Liz said quietly.

'Explanations later,' the man stood and walked towards her. He adjusted the brace behind Liz's head. 'Rest now.'

'You gonna give me your name?' Liz sneered.

'Kassat. My name's Kassat Ran'Lo.'

'My name is—'

'Liz. I know who you are,' Kassat said, leaving the room.



LIZ WOKE LATER to find the pipes hanging loosely next to her, gone from her arms, the socket removed and only a faint red circle remaining. Beside her rested a mesh platter with welded plates that bore strange, unfamiliar food stuffs. In the centre of the tray a translucent, plastic card was inscribed with some words: *Eat well. Get your strength up. XXX. Kassat.*

Liz picked up a moist plant. It was brightly coloured with soft leaves and a sweet smell. Its touch was like the soft skin of those Uphiver brats she killed. Liz grabbed it and stuffed it into her mouth. It

tasted good. The other food was less delicate. Some of it she recognised from stories she had heard. There was a bug-like creature, its hind shell cracked open to allow access to pulpy flesh that trickled down her throat. Small ovoid bones which, when bitten through, revealed a twin coloured marrow, white and yellow. Liz devoured these morsels and sat with the tray for some time.

Later, Kassat arrived.

'Awake?' he said by way of greeting. 'Eaten everything? Flower included.'

'What?' Liz looked up at him, still chewing her food.

'A flower, from Catachan.' Kassat produced another of the fragile, sweet tasting plants. 'A deathworld with the most exquisite flowers. They're not traditionally eaten, but savoured for their beauty.' Kassat placed it behind Liz's ear, stroking her face as he did so.

Liz considered smashing the mesh tray across his face but stopped herself. 'What does "ex-ex-ex" mean?' she said, waving the card at Kassat.

'It's an expression of affection,' Kassat purred, brushing dust from a lapel.

'Where I come from they're kill markings.'

'How very ominous.'

'Why would you express an affection for me?' Liz pushed the grate onto the floor. It crashed loudly to the steel ground.

'It is my way. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. It's a philosophy I have long followed.'

'Don't make sense to me?' Liz crossed her arms.

'Oh dear. Call it a clash of cultures.'

Liz spat at the too-clean floor. 'What do you want from me, Kassat Ran'Lo?'

'You'll need to learn the art of conversation,' Kassat said, wiping the spittle from the tiles with a handkerchief.

'I don't need to learn anything.'

'Oh, you will. You owe me your life. You owe me a favour, and in order to perform it with any grace you will need to be prepared.'

'I'm no mistress. I'm a killer,' Liz said removing the flower from behind her ear. She crushed it.

'I know what you are and what you do.'

'I won't do anything for you.'

'Then you will die,' Kassat said coldly. He spun on his heels and left the room.

Liz stared at the modular, steel plates that made up the ceiling. She had counted the rivets in a brief moment of lucidity some days earlier, at one of the cold points in her fever. She reached out and took the tray, sliding it under the covers with her, keeping it close. After a moment, she also tugged free one of the tubes that had been in her arm, and secreted it in the same place.

Kassat strode back into the room. In his hands he held a locked, iron-bound casket. 'This is what I need from you, sump rat.' His manner was rougher now.

Kassat leant forward and slipped his fingers into the case lock, a pair of hollow eyes on an embossed skull. Liz flicked the tray from beneath the bed and swung it at Kassat. It caught him in the face and the noble staggered backwards, crashing through a rack of medical equipment and falling to the floor. Liz struggled forwards, tripping onto the floor beside him. Kassat slammed the casket down towards her and caught her in the chest. Liz screamed as something snapped. Her arms couldn't coordinate. She rolled across the floor towards him. Liz grabbed both ends of the tube and slipped it around Kassat's throat. The noble struggled and managed to stand. Liz gripped him around the waist with her legs, driving her heels into his kidneys.

Kassat started to laugh.

Liz pulled harder on the makeshift garrotte.

Kassat laughed louder.

'Harder! You're going to have to pull harder than that!' he screamed, spinning violently around, driving Liz into the bed.

Pain coursed through her back and she released the tube. Kassat grabbed her arms and held her to the bed.

'Drugs, my girl. The harder you struggle, the more you fight them, the worse they get. Right now you couldn't even raise a lasgun if I put one in your hand. You're mine,' Kassat Ran-Lo sneered. 'You'll do as I say or die.'

Liz lay still. 'You wouldn't have brought me here, saved my life, if you were gonna kill me straight off. It's a bad investment.'

'Perhaps I wanted to see how well you'd take the news? Perhaps I had other plans for you. Trade you as a pleasure slave to House Helmawr?'

'Nah,' Liz said, 'You ain't that smart.'

'Perhaps,' Kassat said, letting go of her shoulders and sitting up. 'Perhaps I'm not. So let's say we make a deal? You are a mercenary, after all.'

'You're wrong, Kassat. I was ready for death the day I smuggled myself Uphive.'

'How about revenge?' The nobleman resumed opening the elaborate steel case and produced a small holo-monitor. He tapped some switches and a spectral image flickered into light. Men and women, Uphivers, moved about one another in a large chamber, drank from elaborate fluted glasses and watched as slaves, tethered together at the ankles, fought for their pleasure.

'This is a ball I gave some week-cycles ago. I had a holo-recorder inserted into a servitor, keeping him alive long enough for me to get this recording.' The image bucked and swayed as it moved throughout the crowd. 'There is a man who will be present at the next such occasion. His name is Terrak Ran'Lo. I want him dead. I want his place at the Ran'Lo council.'

'And you want me to do this for you?'

'For yourself as well. He is the man who employed Aldus Harkon, the man whose money sponsored the ambush that saw the death of your friends.'

'What?'

'You may not consider me to be smart, Liz, but you, my sweet thug, are as dense as concrete. You talked and talked during your malaise. I know all about your gang, the hunters, your friends' deaths, coming Uphive and killing Harkon. I had to increase your dosage just to keep you quiet when night came.'

Liz stared at Kassat, tracing his calculating features with her eyes. His face was alight with satisfaction. He could barely suppress his grin.

'This man-' Kassat hit an inlaid rune and froze the device's image. 'Terrak Ran'Lo is the man who organised for the deaths of your friends, organised their deaths as a blood sport, as entertainment for his young proteges. It was a hunt, Liz, and you and your gang were the animals.'

Liz stared at the image. Terrak was old, his face soft and unthreatening. His eyes looked calm, like tranquil waters.

'Doesn't look like a man with murder on his mind, does he?' Kassat growled.

Liz fixed her gaze on those eyes; still, unfathomable, unmoving. 'What do you need me to do?' she whispered.



'T'S SIMPLE. Really,' Kassat pressed, restrained, patient. 'Really?' Liz sneered, her face close to his, eyes reflecting the bank of grid lights above them. Kassat stood in the centre of his living quarters, his elaborate furniture pushed to its edges, the ornately tiled floor cleared of clutter. She stumbled in the awkward shoes Kassat had given her to wear and landed on her rump. She had never seen anything like them, so impractical: spindly, elongated heels forcing her forwards, up onto her toes. The hum of the lighting grid droned behind the thin music Kassat had set piping from a cone-shaped machine that ran off a rotating copper disc. It echoed though the high ceiling and around the ironwork gargoyles which clung to the corners of the room. Liz noticed that the table, onto which she had crashed the other day, had been replaced.

'Yes,' Kassat said, stepping backwards for a moment, brushing down his silk coat, 'the man leads. You simply follow.' The noble held his arms out again.

Liz spat on the floor. 'What is this thing anyway?' she growled.

'This dance is called a vaults. It is an elegant practice many millennia old.'

'I don't get it.'

'I don't understand,' Kassat said.

'Oh yeah?' Liz replied, crouching down.

'No, you should say "I don't understand",' he chided.

'Look! All I need to do is kill this guy and we're square,' Liz said, bending to pull off a dress shoe and shaking it at him. 'I don't get... understand why I need to do all this,' she sighed, rubbing at her blistered feet.

'You will not infiltrate Terrak's guards at his quarters. At the ball he'll have only one guardian. He will not be expecting an attack.'

'Because it's suicide?' Liz pulled at the muscles in her neck and rolled her shoulders.

Kassat paused, considered the woman at his feet, and adjusted his cuffs. 'For some, perhaps.'

'And for me?'

'You were born with an animal's instinct for survival. Uphive assassins are less—'

'Cunning?' Liz said, standing and replacing her shoe.

'No, they're cunning all right. Rather, they are less crude.'

'Crude,' Liz said coldly, 'Yes, I think I understand.'

Kassat returned to his position. 'You need to appear as though you have been an Uphiver all your life. Not some savage from the lowest level. You will have to tame some of your feral impulses.'

Liz sighed, then slowly sashayed forwards with small, fluid steps. Kassat's eyes widened in delight. She took him by the arms and held him gently at the small of her back.

'Excellent,' Kassat purred. 'And again...'



LIZ STARED AT her reflection in the window of Kassat's private chambers.

She could hardly recognise her reflection. She was clad in a bodysuit, cross hatched with nano-filaments that cast a cascade of changing colours, primarily intended to accentuate her figure. Kassat had provided her with a pair of those elaborate, impractical shoes, that revealed much of her feet. Her broken toes, she had noticed, had been reset, the missing two replaced. Kassat had employed some woman, to spend many hours reconstructing and painting her toe and finger nails. She couldn't see the point.

A dark blue, feathered head-dress was strapped to Liz's shoulders. It fanned out around her face, which was the part that Liz least recognised. Her hair was slicked back and bound into a tail and painted completely white. Her face was similarly covered, bar her lips, which had been painted a bright blood red where they met.

Liz turned to one side and then the other. She looked through her reflection, through the window to the night sky outside. She had never been in these private quarters before. They were filled with strange devices, antiques and furniture made from an organic substance Kassat called 'wood'. They had the only exterior window in

Kassat's quarters, but even the one spoke of quite unimaginable wealth. They would provide a good view of the sunrise, they were that high above the toxic ash clouds. At the moment, outside Liz could see the sad little stars. They were like nothing she had imagined, more like pin-pricks in the darkness. The way the merchants had spoken of them she believed that they were massive planets of fire. But she was glad it was dark now. She could not really imagine what the view would look like during the day, but she knew she could not help but be unnerved by the vast openness of the view, all these miles above her natural home.

Kassat entered the chamber, clapping his hands together happily. 'They've done fantastic work, don't you think?' he grinned.

'It's impractical.'

'Nonsense, my dear. Kick the shoes off and you're in a fully functioning combat suit. Much like the one you stole from those hunters. That padding isn't simply there to flatter you. That's mesh armour. Finest quality. Lighter than those feathers.'

Kassat was attired in a material that adjusted its colours to match the background as he moved throughout the room. 'Latest thing, adapted from Imperium camouflage,' Kassat said, noticing Liz's scornful gaze.

'I'm going to need a weapon,' she sniffed.

'Ah yes. But I don't quite trust you to give you one now. No offence,' Kassat said.

'None taken,' Liz said, gazing at the immense desk set before the window. Kassat had it piled high with papers, holocards and locked files. It was the only place in his quarters that was in disorder.

'Besides they are still somewhat security-minded at these things. No one gets in without being scanned. I've arranged for your weapon to be hidden in the centrepiece of the main banquet table,' Kassat said, walking face to face with Liz.

'The point exactly?' Liz starred back at him.

'They wouldn't dare break a fragile object of such beauty. They wouldn't expect that a weapon would be hidden in an ice sculpture that took hundreds of hours to create. It's simply not within their nature,' Kassat said, adjusting the head-dress on Liz's shoulders.

'But I'm crude?' she replied.

'You can be,' Kassat returned, unfazed. He placed his hand on Liz's cheek. 'Looking at you now I'd never guess that you weren't born Uphive. You're a remarkable woman, Liz.' Kassat stroked her face gently.

'The gun is in the ice statue,' Liz said as if to herself, stepping away.

'That's right.' Kassat turned to the door.

'How long now?'

'Twenty minutes or so before I am expected.' Kassat moved towards the door his back still turned to Liz.

'And me?' She took one last look at herself in the window. Part of her wished that she had a record of this woman, this new incarnation of Liz from the Underhive.

'I've arranged for you to go with another party of nobles. Eddas Ulandi owes me a favour. My people will take you to them,' Kassat said, partway through the door.

'I'll see you there then,' Liz said quietly, returning his gaze.

'Yes. Emperor bless you, my dear. I hope to see you safe at the end of all this,' Kassat said, turning to face her for a moment, before he strode out of his quarters in a rush of shimmering cloth.

'Liar,' Liz said, and spat on the tiled floor.



GIANT DOORS, three storeys high, driven by huge pneumatic arms decorated with ornate crests, slid open, the air from the hydraulics purring out across the floor. Liz walked amongst the Ulandi, at the back of a procession arranged according to a hierarchy she didn't start to understand. She took a place amongst the body slaves, the dancers, courtesans and pit-fighters. She had remained close to Eddas Ulandi, a rat-faced man, the whole while keeping her mind fixed on her objective and her way out.

The noble's ball was in full sway by the time she arrived in the vast ballroom, as wide as an entire Underhive dome. All present, with only one exception, were dressed in a kaleidoscopic collection of fabrics and colours. Liz could not believe the complexity of some of the garments,

nor the shapes worked from the hair and bodies. All around her, men and women moved about in the same states of undress she'd expect of an Underhive pleasure bar, not a nobles' ball. The exception was a man, plainly an offworlder, dressed in dark grey robes and bearing a heavy iron talisman around his neck. Where he strode, the crowds parted; even the most arrogant looking of Uphivers bowed their heads and averted their eyes. Aside from the guards, this man was the only one to openly carry a weapon. A heavy pistol hung alongside the talisman. He was dangerous. Liz tried not to stare at him.

At the centre of the great room was a gaping hole that plunged deep into the heart of this part of Hive Primus. It was covered with glass a metre thick, so as to give the illusion that those present were walking upon the Hive itself, thousands of feet above the foundries below. Gingerly Liz took a single step out on to the glass. On either side, pillars of rough-hewn stone and iron soared high up into the air above, creating an equally dizzying effect. This openness was unfamiliar to her, the expanse of space oppressive and dizzying. The only cover afforded were the frail carved wooden tables at which many of the nobles sat, gorging themselves. They wouldn't stop a shell from a juve's first pistol, let alone automatic gun fire.

Kassat, from within the crowd, caught her eye. She followed where he was looking and caught sight of her prey, Terrak Ran'Lo, just as Kassat had described him. She looked back, wanting him to nod, confirm it, make it real, really happening – but Kassat was already striding away. Liz followed, to another open area over which hung a giant structure made of crystals of many colours that hung from spider web-thin chains, that reflected shimmering spotlights about the room. In the centre of this space was a pit. A barbed, steel cage was part-sunk into the ground. In it, two bloodied men chained at the necks fought with dulled, stabbing blades. Nobles stood at the edges and threw paint, nails and fruit at the fighters, jeering and sniggering at the trapped men. They were desperate men, their lives sold to slavery, death a certainty for one of them tonight.

Kassat approached Liz and took her by the hand. She followed him beyond the pit,

onto a polished dancing floor. As they whirled, Kassat clasped her close and pulled her face close to his. Liz tensed.

'An ancient bolt pistol, custom design – explosive, caseless, laser sighted and recoil compensated...' Kassat whispered. Liz could feel his heartbeat, the micro-conduits of the combat suit amplifying its pulse. His heart was racing – as was hers.

'Who's the man in grey?' she hissed.

'A witch hunter. An Imperium Inquisitor, from offworld. Come to inspect the nobility, root out mutations and deviance. Needless to say, he is not pleased with this event.'

'He has a weapon,' Liz growled.

'Yes. You may have to kill him too.'

'What? Did you know he would be here?'

'No!' he spat. 'I knew nothing about it until just now. There are others too: Arbites, Ecclesiarchs, military men and those with something invested in the Imperium. Unlike these nobles, they are men who are prepared to fight.' Kassat pulled away from Liz.

She dragged him back, in close, staring deep into his eyes. 'Kassat, if this is a set-up I will kill you,' she said softly.

'You know,' Kassat smiled, 'I will have to fight back.' The noble patted the small of her back and released her. 'Good luck,' he whispered, then bowed his thanks for the dance.

Kassat slipped quickly back into the bustling crowd. Liz stood alone in the middle of the dance floor, close to the fighting pit. The combatants' arms were locked in a strained grapple. The release system on the cage was a simple catch. Liz started to think. The ice sculpture was thirty or so paces away. One, two... five guards, all armed with autoguns, stood by the doors. The exit route Kassat had mentioned, through a vent set in the wall, was another hundred strides beyond the table where Terrak Ran'Lo was flirting with a young woman, hand on her shoulder, laughing.

'Time,' Liz sneered and headed towards the cage. A dancer tripped over her as she strode purposefully across the floor. He fell backwards in alarm, hundreds of tiny beads cascading from his suit. Liz flicked the lever on the cage.

'Hey, rat-bait!' she called down to the men.

They stared for a moment only, their tired eyes enlivened at this opportunity. The men burst out of the cage, flailing at the nobles standing closest to them. One gripped a young boy by the neck and drove his duelling-blade into his throat. Nobles screamed.

Liz ran for the statue.

The guards reacted slowly, The fighters started slashing a red swathe through the crowd. Their necks still linked by chains they crashed through the nobles like loosed bulls, their awkward, bleeding bodies slipping about on the polished steel floor.

Liz turned to the ice-statue. The carving was of her, Liz, dressed in her gang colours, a naked man at her feet. It was placed in the centre of a table, two score of dishes spiralling out from its centre. She could see Kassat's mocking grin in her mind. The ganger collided with a fleeing noble and rolled over his back as he fell, kicking off the stupid shoes. She landed solidly on her feet and sprinted hard for the table.

The guards began firing at the freed slaves, their shots taking one down. The other, tied to the dying man, tried to drag his body across the floor.

Liz leapt up onto the table, knocking a sallow-faced trader face-first into a platter of eel spawn. He looked up, the tiny eggs spitting from his mouth. Liz grabbed the ice-statue and hurled it at the trader, knocking him onto the ground. The ice shattered, slivers spinning wide and far across the floor. A noble woman screamed as Liz leapt from the table like a feral cat.

Trapped in a deadly embrace with his now-dead opponent, the live slave thrashed like a trapped animal, growling and swiping wildly at the nobles as they clustered around him. The Inquisitor stepped through them and calmly shot out his leg, sending him slipping to the ground in a cascade of blood.

'To raise a weapon against an agent of the Emperor is heresy,' the Inquisitor said. The guards massed at his back opened fire, tiny red explosions erupting all over the slave.

Liz landed on her hands and feet. An Arbiter came at her with a club. She rolled onto her back and kicked him hard in the gut. Over his doubled-up back she saw the Inquisitor turn to face her. Liz used the momentum from the roll to smash her elbow into his face, letting her body weight

carry him to the ground. They both fell into the shattered ice. Liz crawled onto her hands and knees, and swept about on the floor scrabbling for the gun.

The Inquisitor rose, his hands thrusting his pistol at her. Liz dived between the legs of a panicked, fleeing noblewoman. The shot clipped her and her hip burst red. Liz caught sight of the bolt gun as, in the pandemonium, it was kicked into the clearing before the Inquisitor. He raised his gun at Liz again. She dived forward and rolled across the ice. A shot spat over her shoulder. Sliding through melted water, she snatched up the assassination weapon and swung it wide towards the witch hunter. He pulled his trigger.

A flash almost blinded Liz. Something knocked her hard in the chest. Like someone had pulled the floor from beneath her, she fell to the ground. Her heart aching like she'd been knifed. The Inquisitor stared. His mouth opened but he said nothing. A few feathers from Liz's head dress floated to the ground.

Liz looked down at her chest. The mesh armour had stopped the blow. Slowly and deliberately, Liz levelled the laser sight between the Inquisitor's eyes and pulled the trigger. Nobles behind him were showered in gore and brain matter. She ran for the crowd and it parted about her. She dived beneath a table. A wave of gunfire tore through the table, disrupting Liz's dark world with violent keyholes of light.

Liz stood, throwing the table back off her shoulders. Liz closed on Terrak Ran'Lo. The old man was moving for cover, crouching behind a side-table.

'Terrak!' Liz screamed.

Her prey did not notice her. She leapt from above the table and fell upon him, dragging him to the ground. His breath was wine-rancid, his eyes glazed with age.

'Who?' He looked at Liz, her white face sprayed with the blood of the Inquisitor, and his eyes span.

'A message from the Underhive,' Liz spat and pulled the trigger. The blast tore the old man from her hands, throwing him up into the air. The guards, moving in formation through the thinning crowd, began shooting. Liz was clipped twice; the wind was knocked out of her but neither shot pierced the body armour. She grabbed her injured arm and returned their fire,

running parallel to the guards, shooting around stricken nobles and courtesans. Her shots flew wide, but the explosions forced the guards to seek better cover. Liz ran full sprint for her escape vent. An Ecclesiarch stepped in front of her, blocking the entrance. The guards returned fire as Liz pulled the man in front of her. The blasts impacted through the light robes the priest wore. His body shook as Liz held him close to her. She returned fire and clipped one guard in the shoulder; he fell to the polished dance floor. The guards hit the ground again. Liz rolled from underneath the dead Ecclesiarch and dived for the grate.

She slid across the polished floor, crashing face first into the wall. The grate was fixed at its corners. A snaking line of bullets traced across the ground towards Liz. She flicked her pistol to full auto and blew away the grate. Metal shards spat past her face as she dove for freedom. One final, hopeful shot hit her full in the back and blew her forward.



KASSAT SAT IN HIS study, staring blankly at desk-top before him. Audits, mercantile reports, credit transferrals both above and below board. A dizzying array of numbers, estimations and processed units, many hundreds of hours of work to process, but he could not concentrate enough to dive in.

Now he waited, staring at the antique timepiece on his wall, which sat on the wall between his weapons cabinet and an ancient brass-and-leather vox-caster. It was very old and could not keep true Imperial hours. He turned in his chair to look out into the dawn sky. The sun would rise above the cloud cover soon, sending its yellow rays to touch the Spire, lighting up the dark, nebulous mass drifting in swirls below. The ash clouds could be quite beautiful if the light was right. However, like the brightly coloured arrow frogs of Catachan, they were also poisonous. Nevertheless, he had the clouds to thank. They had been the reason for Hive Primus and her sisters. If it weren't for the clouds he would not have been a powerful man.

He fingered the pistol on his lap. Should have been back by now. Wild thoughts of her capture ran through his head. In his head, he ran a possible scenario: the Inquisitor uses his years of experience of information retrieval on the Underhive girl. She is strong, but not without the frailties of the flesh. Pain can be very real. What's more, she has no reason to conceal him. She reveals all, the plan, his involvement – the truth is released. He is sentenced to death. His only chance, to escape now? His bags are packed, his shuttle readied. Three more minutes and then he can take flight. He has some guards on his books. he can find out what is happening.

Kassat turned from the window and glanced again at the grate through which he expected her some time ago. Perhaps she had not found the section schematic he had left for her.

He pressed the button on his communication relay.

'Sir?' the voice crackled.

A filth-covered form crashed in through the vent in front of him.

'Never mind,' Kassat said, flicking the switch back.

'Kassat,' she said standing.

She was dripping blood on his Talleran rug. She had been cut on the hands and feet, but the suit had held. Her face was no longer pristine white, but stippled red and black with blood and oil.

'You look quite daemonic, my dear. Are you successful?' he asked.

Liz brought her gun up to face him. It was bent and dented, the sight destroyed. Perhaps it had only a few rounds left.

'What's the matter, my dear?' Kassat said smoothly.

'Just checking,' Liz said with a thin smile, and lowered the pistol

'You kill him?'

'Oh yes.'

'Excellent.' Kassat cocked the gun beneath his desk, 'You've done good work,' He pulled the trigger and she span to the ground. Kassat peered over his desk. She lay there, clutching her leg.

'Whaaa-?' Liz screamed.

'Weak spot at the right knee. Sorry. Failed to mention it,' Kassat grinned.

'Bastard!' Liz screamed, bringing her gun up towards him and staggering to her feet.

'Liz, Liz, what do you take me for? That won't work in here. I have a suppression emitter dialled in to that weapon. It won't fire.'

Liz pulled the trigger again and again. It clicked over lifelessly. She screamed and threw the gun at him. He nimbly stepped aside, then levelled his own gun at her head.

'Just think of the honours I'll be awarded for capturing the killer of Aldus Harkon, four Ran'Lo hunters – and of course the mighty Darlon Ulant.''

'Who?' Liz groaned.

Kassat stood, pressing the gun barrel to her head, twisting it so that it cleared a patch of pink flesh beneath the white and blood. 'That wasn't Terrak Ran'Lo, silly girl. You killed Darlon Ulant, a man intent on stopping the hunts. On stopping my business.'

'What?'

'Oh, I thought you would have got that one. I'm Terrak Ran'Lo,' Kassat smiled, bowing his head slightly.

'But–'

'I knew who you were the minute you arrived,' Terrak said, delicately wiping the grime from Liz's face with the gun. 'You can't believe the harm you've done to my business. Nobles now reluctant to send their useless whelps off on the hunt on account of one rat-loving ganger.'

Now, in the dawning light, Liz could see Kassat change before her. His movements were no longer refined and practised, but harsh and savage. His eyes narrowed and intensified like laser sights. There was no ambiguity any more, just her and Terrak Ran'Lo.

'Why didn't you kill me?' she yelled.

'So much to be gained, my dear. Besides, like a cat, I prefer to play with rats before I kill them.'

Faster than he could react, Liz slapped the gun away from her forehead and stepped to one side. Terrak brought his weapon back to face her but now she was standing before him, her leg trembling... and with the Inquisitor's bolt pistol in her own hands. Terrak growled.

'Something I picked up along the way... dear,' she hissed.

'You can't win. The Arbiters will be here in a few seconds. If you shoot you'll kill us both. Those are explosive shells. The

window will break and the air pressure will suck us out.'

'Good,' Liz replied, aiming over his shoulder and pulling the trigger anyway. The glass behind Terrak burst outwards, throwing the room into mayhem. Caskets, papers and hangings were ripped out through the window.

As the air sucked at him, Terrak fired back, catching Liz in the arm. She spun like a swamp lizard and fell to the floor, the debris sweeping her towards the window. She crashed into Terrak's table and a wide gash opened up on her forehead. The Arbiters rushed into the room, shouting something that was lost in the howling torrent.

Liz slid towards the howling window frame but managed to grasp the edge. The shattered glass gut deep into her hands. Something was tugging at her legs. Liz looked over her shoulder. Terrak clung to the body suit, legs flailing in the rush, his hands a vice around her ankle. His icy face was shot through with fear.

'Save me!' he screamed.

An Arbiter swept out through the window, knocking Liz's right arm from the sill. Her other hand was being shredded by the remaining shards of glass.

'Liz!' Terrak screamed. 'Pull us in... and I'll give you anything! Anything!'

Liz looked back towards the noble. 'No, Terrak! You will die today!'

She let go of the window and spun around as the gale swept her away from the building. She grabbed Terrak tight around the body and together they sailed out into the air.

'Why? Terrak screamed, his face white with fear.

'A promise to a friend!' Liz screamed back, the air screaming around them, slapping Terrak's coat into her face. 'Doubt your doctors can piece you together... after you land... if they find you!' she yelled.

Liz pushed free of Terrak. She sailed out into the rushing air, her arms spread towards the rising sun, its orange rays lighting up soft fissures and rising peaks in the boiling ash clouds below. She smiled as the winds swept her out over this landscape, through its gullies and down into the darkness. ●

BLOOD ANGEL, LIBRARIAN
TROILLUS LEADS AN ASSAULT
ON THE HEART OF THE
CORRUPTION OF PLANET
OBZIDION, THE TEMPLE
OF N'GREEL B'HAAN,
CAUGHT BETWEEN IMPERIAL
BOMBARDMENT AND
POSSESSION BY CHAOS.

DEFILERS OF
THE TEMPLE, SHOOT
THEM DOWN...

OBVIOUS TACTICS!

Episode Fourteen

SCRIPT & ART: DAVID PUGH

PILOT, STRAIGHT
INTO THE FIRE...

...EXTINGUISH
ITS FLAME!

COME MEN
INTO THE BOWELS
OF THIS PESTILENCE
AND RIP OUT ITS
SANCTUM!

PAKKA

PAKKA

PAKKA





...BUT SUCH
PATHS LEAD
TO GLORY!

CHAAAARGE!

KACHOOOM!

HURTLING TOWARDS THE TEMPLE IN THE
PANTAS MOUNTAINS, SERGEANT ANTENOR
STILL FIGHTS ABOARD THE DOOMED PLATFORM.

GIVE UP LITTLE
MAN, IF THE FIRE
DOES NOT TAKE
YOU THE IMPACT
WHEN WE HIT
THE CITY WILL!

PRATTING FOOL
DON'T YOU KNOW
YET THAT WE ARE
FALLING ONTO YOUR
LORD'S TEMPLE!

AIIEEE! THIS
CANNOT BE,
SCHEMING
MEDDLESOME
CREATURE.

THEN I SHALL
SAVE N'GREEL
B'HAAN!

I SEE I
MUST KILL YOU
QUICKER THAN
I PLANNED!

KABLAM!



...BUT HE WILL ONLY
RISE FROM ITS ASHES!"



WE MUST HURRY,
WE MUST SUMMON
B'HAAN AS THE
PLATFORM
STRIKES!

HIGH ABOVE, A LONE
CALLIDUS ASSASSIN
IS WATCHING.



THE PLATFORM
NEARS THE MOUNTAIN...
TROILUS MUST ACT
QUICKLY TO SUMMON
THE DAEMON.



AND I TOO MUST
HASTEN IF THERE IS
TO BE A HOPE OF
RESCUING EITHER
OF THE ANGELS!



THE DOOR
AT LAST...
OPEN!

KACHOOM!



THE RELIC...
THE THIGH-
BONE OF THE
DAEMON!



IN THE NAME
OF THE EMPEROR,
I SUMMON YOU,
N'GREAL B'HAAN.
THUS I DEFILE
YOUR FOUL
REMAINS!

KACHOOM!

SKRISSH!

AAIYEE!
THE GATE
OPENS!

HE COMES!
HE COMES!

TO BE CONTINUED...



The Lives of Ferag Lion-Wolf

by Barrington J. Bayley

FERAG LION-WOLF, Champion of Tzeentch, ruler of five worlds, rose from the slab of sparkling white alabaster on which he slept and prepared to receive his honoured visitor. Young maidens bathed him, anointing his body with pleasant-smelling oils so that he gave off an enchanting aroma. The same slave-girls dressed him in garments of shimmering heliotrope silk, decorated all over with the sinuous symbols of the greatest of the gods, and accoutred him with his weapons.

When they had finished, an officer wearing the uniform designed for the palace staff by Ferag himself entered and bowed, waiting for permission to speak.

'The chariot of Lord Quillilil has been sighted entering our planetary system, my great and gracious lord,' the officer announced, once Ferag had impatiently signalled him to continue. 'It will arrive within the hour.'

'And is everything ready?'

'All has been made ready, my great and gracious lord.'

'Good...' Ferag purred.

He dismissed the officer and then turned to examine himself in a full-length mirror. He could not help but be pleased with what he saw. Ferag Lion-Wolf had always been a striking figure, even before he found favour with the Changer of the Ways, to give the great god Tzeentch just one of his many titles. Rugged, strong and handsome, Ferag had earned the admiration of all on his home world, as well as on the many worlds where he had fought and adventured before becoming a Champion of Chaos.

But now! Ferag was almost beside himself as he beheld the magnificent transformation wrought on him by the Great Conspirator's marks of favour. In

place of his left arm was a powerful, flexing tentacle with twice the reach. His right foot was a scrabbling claw, particularly exciting to behold as it so much resembled the claw of a Chi'khami'tzann Tsunoi or Feathered Lord, the rank of daemon closest to Tzeentch himself! An extra pair of eyes was set in his forehead, above the others but closer together, giving his face a curiously watchful appearance, like the face of a lurking spider. Those eyes could look into someone's mind and see if plots were being laid there. They could also kill with a single baleful glance. His mouth was also changed. It could pucker into a long tube, half the length of his arm, with which to suck pure magical energy from the souls of others. Tzeentch had given him power and change! And this was not the end of the rewards he was to receive...

Ferag made a magical sign, causing a shimmering oval surface to appear in the air, looking like a vertical pool of water or maybe quicksilver. With his forefinger he traced runes in the Dark Tongue, which could only be spoken in the Warp. The runes spelled out his Chaos name, so recently bestowed upon him by his Greater Daemon patron.

With another gesture he dissolved the writing screen.

And now to welcome Quillilil!

Ferag strode from the lofty-ceilinged chamber and on to the spacious balcony overlooking the extensive palace, looking around him and, as always, taking immense satisfaction in his accomplishments. He was ruler of an entire planetary system within the Imperium of Chaos, called by outsiders the Eye of Terror. Five of the system's eight planets were inhabited. Several billion beings all lived in dread, in

obedience, in utmost respect and adoration, of Ferag Lion-Wolf.

Ferag had designed his palace to resemble what he imagined the heavenly palaces of Tzeentch and his Feathered Lords to be like. Tier upon tier of terraces rose to the cloud layer, sparkling and glowing in iridescent colours. Towers and minarets and convoluted galleries twisted and twined like snakes. But none of it, of course, was restricted by gravity. The towers and galleries jutted out at crazy angles, as if they had been constructed in space or – as was the impression Ferag had striven to create – the vast unknowable reaches of the Warp.

His aides and guards gathered around him. It was time for Quillilil's chariot to arrive. A magnifier had been set up on the balcony. Through it, events in the upper atmosphere became visible as though they were only a short distance away. So they were able to watch as the chariot from the neighbouring planetary system, an elaborate, burnished affair decorated with gold and silver curlicues, appeared in the lemon-yellow sky and swooped through the upper air. Diving for the cloud layer, it descended towards the palace.

Ferag and his aides carefully watched the surrounding countryside, dotted with towns and villages whose privilege it was to share a landscape with their mighty ruler. Yes, there it was! The plot was afoot! Shark-like craft were hurtling over the horizon, three altogether, coming from different directions. In addition, from hidden places nearer at hand, a dozen wild-looking figures mounted on flying discs were soaring upwards, long hair flying behind them, waving weapons.

There was magic at work, or those discs would not have been able to fly here. They were K'echi'tsonae, steeds of Tzeentch, and their proper medium was the Warp. Peering closely at the magnifier, Ferag could see the rows of teeth around their rims.

Both shark-craft and riders were converging on the interstellar chariot.

Ferag had a consummate sense of timing. He raised a hand, staying his aides who were ready to release a barrage and destroy the raiders. Instead, he allowed the raiders to get closer to their prey.

'Let me deal with this,' Ferag murmured in his melodious baritone voice.

When it seemed there could be no help for the descending foreign vessel on its state visit, he pointed with all five fingers of his right hand. The air became charged with power. It crackled. All present felt the waves of prickling sensations over their entire bodies. And from the fingers of master magician Ferag Lion-Wolf there issued streams of raw magic, crossing the intervening miles instantaneously, sizzling, swaying, touching all three shark-craft and all dozen disc raiders.

For a brief moment the great stream of energy flickered around them, and then, in that same moment, they shivered and were gone.

Ferag Lion-Wolf smiled knowingly. Lord Quillilil's chariot settled itself onto a marbled landing bay further down the terrace. Ferag and his party had already made their way there when the ornate door of the chariot swung open. Flamboyantly clad guards emerged and took up station on either side, glancing nervously around them.

Lord-Commander Quillilil stepped down from the threshold. Unlike Ferag, he had never been a Space Marine, and so was much shorter in stature than the hulking Lion-Wolf. He wore a cloak of brilliant blue. His hands were small, with a shrivelled, talon-like look. In place of a mouth, he had a compact, curved beak, turquoise in colour. A straw-coloured plume sprouted from the top of his otherwise bald pate. His eyes were round and unblinking, and seemed unable to stare in any direction but straight ahead, so that he looked about him continually with sudden nervous movements.

'My Lord-Commander Quillilil!' Ferag greeted breezily, spreading arm and tentacle in welcome.

‘My Lord-Commander Ferag!’

Quillilil’s voice was high and chirping. He allowed Ferag to embrace him briefly, then stepped back to gaze at the palace around him. He was clearly impressed.

‘I am happy to have been able to protect you, my lord Quillilil,’ Ferag said. ‘It appears some of your enemies have gathered here.’

Twittering laughter rose from Quillilil’s throat. His eyes glittered. ‘Yes! Subversives from my own planet who fled here some time ago. I knew my visit would flush them out! Why do you think I came here? You should be flattered, my lord Ferag, at the trust I have placed in you. My chariot is unarmed!’

‘I, too, have used the occasion to my benefit,’ Ferag told him. ‘Your renegades could not have acted without help from some of my own subjects. They are now paying the penalty for their disloyalty.’ He glanced at the surrounding countryside, taking pleasure in knowing of the death and torture being inflicted there.

‘I have prepared a banquet for tonight,’ he continued to tell his guest. ‘You are particularly partial to human flesh, I believe?’

Quillilil clacked his beak rapidly, in eager affirmation.

‘Skinned specimens have been marinading in spices for the past week. Tonight they will be roasted for your delectation. Tomorrow we will discuss a treaty between us. For the present, though, allow me to show you round my palace. But first—’

Ferag raised arm and tentacle and swept them through the air, making magical passes. There came an immense rumbling sound. The huge edifice all around them was coming apart. Towers, terraces, galleries, halls, all separated and began gyrating in the air, performing a gigantic dance. The landing bay on which they stood itself took part in the display, whirling lazily through a cloud and back again.

Then, with meticulous precision, everything came together again. Stone block met stone block in silent harmony,

mortared together as before. In seconds the palace had reassembled itself.

Quillilil trilled in feigned pleasure. ‘Most impressive, my lord Ferag! And if you will allow me in return...’

He too made an elaborate sign with his hand. Further along the terrace, a jutting arcade detached itself, floated a short distance away into the ether and then began spinning at speed.

Quillilil made delicate pulling motions with his fingers. The minaret ceased spinning and returned to its place with a deep grinding of stone upon stone. There was a gentle murmur of approval from the assembled aides and retainers.

It was common for Tzeentchian magicians to show off to one another on first meeting. But for all his chirpiness, the visitor could not hide the fact that he had been bettered by his host.

Surreptitiously, Ferag cast his guest a passing glance with his upper pair of eyes, not wanting Quillilil to see the dark flash that would show he was looking into his mind. It was as he had expected. Quillilil was not happy at being ruler of a mere one-planet system. He envied Ferag his domains. The visit was but the first step in an elaborate, convoluted plan to take his place, stretching far into the future. Quillilil’s brain was a maze of plot and counter-plot, intricate to the point of madness.

Which was as it should be in a Champion of Tzeentch, the Great Conspirator and Master of Fortune. Quillilil would not, however, see his plans come to fruition. Ferag had laid a strategy to add his guest’s planet to his own dominion. As for Quillilil himself, he would be disposed of as easily as one of the feeble humans he was about to feast upon.

Ushering his visitor from the landing bay, Ferag began conducting him through the great vaulted halls of the palace, pointing out feature after feature. But his mind was not on the task of being a tour guide. The promise made to him by his Greater Daemon patron recently – given to him at the same time as his Chaos name – had left Ferag in a

state of pure exultation. It was not long, therefore, before he began talking instead of himself.

‘Know, my friend, that I have lived a most eventful life, even for one of our kind,’ he said seriously to Quillilil as they strode. ‘Have you wondered at my name? Its meaning can tell you much about me. I was born on a primitive planet in the Imperium, outside of our Chaos realm. Life there was dangerous. What few human beings there were knew only how to make tools and weapons of stone, and they had it hard. Among my people one did not receive a permanent name at birth. One had to earn it as one grew to manhood. Now the lion-wolf is the most fierce animal on that planet. Standing twice the height of a human, with jaws that can crush a horse, able to outpace the fastest runner – it would take twenty armed warriors to defeat it! When I was eight years old, one of these beasts killed my father...’



THE REMINISCENCE took his mind back. He was a naked boy, standing on the dusty scrubland of the world of his birth. In the sky was the looming globe of its smouldering red sun.

And barely ten paces away, the lifeless body of his father was being tossed back and forth in the jaws of a lion-wolf! When the beast had come loping across the landscape towards them, they had both run for the protection of a rocky tor. But when he heard his father’s stout timber spear clattering to the ground behind him, he had turned to witness the dreadful sight.

The boy hesitated. While the beast devoured its prey he could, perhaps, gain the summit of the tor and the fearsome animal might forget him.

But it had killed his father!

A screaming rage gripped him. He ran back and laid his hands on the spear. It

was almost too heavy for him to lift, but he raised its fire-hardened point and yelled at the fearsome lion-wolf for all he was worth.

‘You killed my father!’

The creature dropped the torn, mauled body and turned its massive face towards him, sniffing the air. He could smell its shaggy coat as it came towards him to investigate. He made jabbing motions with the spear, yelling and retreating. He was at the bottom of the tor now.

The lion-wolf gathered itself together and leaped!

The boy stood his ground, determined to gain revenge for the death of his father. He jammed the butt of the spear in a crevice in the rock and aimed the spearpoint at the gaping jaws of the lion-wolf as it sprang.

The lion-wolf had intended to bite off his head with one snap of its great teeth. Instead, the spear rammed itself down the beast’s throat and bore the full impact of that huge body’s momentum. Sprawled on the scrubland, the lion-wolf struggled to extract the offending shaft, coughing up great gouts of blood. The boy gave it no chance to do so. On he came, pushing with all his might – pushing the spear down and down, until he came within reach of those deadly claws! But by then it was too late for the animal. The spear had entered its heart.

Even so, the end was long coming. The lion-wolf did not die easily. It writhed and thrashed as its lifeblood poured from its mouth, watched by the fascinated, exultant, grieving eight-year-old...



‘SO THEN THE tribe gave me my permanent name,’ Lord-Commander Ferag said to his guest. ‘In my native tongue “Ferag” means “killer”, so I was known as “Killer of the Lion-Wolf”. I have retained the first word out of respect for my original people.

‘No other warrior had ever borne such a name, for no one else had killed a lion-wolf single-handed, and probably has not even now.’

‘A stirring tale!’ Lord Quillilil chirruped. ‘When did you become inducted into the Adeptus Astartes?’

‘No more than forty days later, a squad of Purple Stars Space Marines landed near our village. They were told of my courage with the lion-wolf. They tested me in every way, then took me back with them to their monastery.’

‘I served the Purple Stars for the next twenty years, learning all their ways, going on their campaigns as a scout, as a messenger and in countless other roles. At the end of that time I was judged fit to be transformed into a Space Marine. I was given the extra organs, the progenoid glands, the sacred gene-seed. For two hundred years I served with the Purple Stars, and saw more action than I could hope to relate, eventually rising to the rank of Company Commander. I particularly distinguished myself in a raid on a Tyranid hive ship...’



ONCE AGAIN Ferag Lion-Wolf found his mind regressing to the far past. A squad of Purple Stars Space Marines was cutting a way through the shell of a vast, snail-like form, its motive power crippled by laser fire so that it had become separated from the hive fleet. None of them knew what to expect on the inside, and what they did find was nothing they could have expected.

They were in a round tunnel which pulsed and throbbed like a living organ, branching at irregular intervals. A huge thumping sound was all around them, like the beating of a gigantic heart. The light was dim, blood-red, and seemed to seep from out of the very walls themselves.

Then, scrabbling down the tunnels which were scarcely large enough to

contain them, came the Tyranid warriors, huge bossed beasts, six-limbed, worse than the worst nightmare, each head a mass of razor-sharp teeth, each front pair of limbs whirling twin swords that could cut straight through a Space Marine's armour!

With horror Ferag saw his bolter shots bounce off the Tyranids' armour while his men were butchered around him. There was no chance of retreating to the assault craft.

Then his mind flashed to the time he had fought the lion-wolf as a boy, and he took heart at the memory. He drew his chain sword in his left gauntlet. Sparks flew as he parried the Tyranid boneswords, as he later came to know them. This enabled him to get close in – and the muzzle of his bolter went straight between the Tyranid's massed teeth!

The monster jumped then slumped as the bolt exploded inside its body. Ferag let out a roar of laughter. He barked into his communicator.

‘That's the way to do it, men! That's the way to do it!’



THE HEROIC DEED faded as Ferag brought his mind back to the present. ‘The tactics I developed on that day became standard for fighting the foul Tyranids at close quarters,’ he finished.

He paused for a moment. ‘Most warriors would be satisfied with such a life, I dare say, but I was not. The Imperium began to seem too confined for me – I wanted something grander, something to give scope for my abilities! In secret I began to study the ways of magic. I knew, of course, that there had once been a great heretical war, when fully half the original Space Marine legions took refuge in our Imperium of Chaos. I became attracted to the study of Tzeentch. And eventually I did the

unthinkable. I deserted my Chapter, and made my way here to devote myself to his service.' He grinned.

'And now I am his Champion! Commander of five worlds! It has been a glorious time! I could not begin to regale you with my adventures, or say how long I have lived. In the Eye of Terror a day is a thousand years, a thousand years is but a day, and time means nothing, until death comes.'

'Your fame spreads far and wide, my dear Lord Commander,' his guest cooed.

'And so it should!' Ferag made a face. 'Do you know, my lord Quillilil, with what contempt I was treated at first? I am a Space Marine of the Second Founding, raised after the Horus war. The Chaos Legionaries are all of the First Founding. They thought themselves harder, and me as soft and weak. Well, they soon learned their mistake.'

Ferag's hand slashed through the air. 'I have killed thirty-five Traitor Marines in hand-to-hand combat! Twenty of them followers of Khorne, the berserker Blood God! And a dozen of those World Eaters, the most feared of all! There is no greater warrior than Ferag Lion-Wolf!'

His voice dropped and became more conciliatory. 'Forgive my boasting, my lord, but I only speak the truth.'

Quillilil twittered flattering laughter. 'It is no boasting at all, my fellow Champion. Why, you are too modest. You almost deprecate yourself. Everyone knows of your great victory on the Bowl Planet.'

'Yessss.' Ferag grinned. It was one of his most beloved memories, perhaps his greatest exploit since coming to the Eye of Terror.

A great army had been assembled, an unholy alliance between the forces of Khorne, the Blood God, and Nurgle, the Great Lord of Disease and Decay, also Tzeentch's most implacable enemy! The battle had been fought in a planet shaped like nothing so much as a shallow bowl, governed by its own special physical laws. It was, in fact, possible to fall off the rim of this bowl and into some inescapable hell.

Ferag had commanded a much smaller Tzeentch force. At first sight the twin hordes looked invincible. The Khorne core of Chaos Space Marines had drenched themselves in blood before the battle even began, butchering their own massed soldiery and driving them towards the enemy. As for the Nurgle horde... a vast, filthy Chaos Daemon, a Great Unclean One, had been at its head, and he had come up with a special tactic. The millions-strong army had been rotted with amoeba plague. Its soldiery were no longer separate individuals, but combined into one sticky, putrid mass which came rolling on, engulfing everything in its path.

Against all this, Ferag had only the special strengths of Tzeentch: strategy and sorcery! It had been a battle of titanic proportions. The Bowl World had glowed and seethed with magical forces for months. But in the end it was Ferag's tactical genius that had won the day. The vile hordes of Khorne and Nurgle had been driven over the planet's rim to go toppling into an eternal hell-world.

Ferag had gathered together what survived of the planet's original inhabitants and had given them a generations-long task – to erect in the middle of the bowl a monument to Tzeentch that towered above the rim itself.

It was no wonder, when he looked back over his life, that the Changer of the Ways appreciated his services. Further, was about to reward him with the greatest possible fulfilment. His Greater Daemon patron, appearing before him in person, had informed him that he was to receive the ultimate gift.

He was to become a Daemon Prince. He would be immortal, no longer subject to death, able to live forever in the heavens of the Warp!

But there was still his guest. Almost reluctantly, Ferag Lion-Wolf returned his attention to the tour of inspection.

'Step this way; my lord Quillilil. There is a most delightful aerial esplanade through here.'

They walked under an ornate archway,

through which shone the lemon-coloured sky. Ferag Lion-Wolf heard a grating sound overhead. Looking up, he saw that a block of stone had dislodged itself from the masonry and had begun to fall.

In that instant it occurred to him that perhaps this was the section of the palace upon which Quillilil had demonstrated his magic. But whether this was so or not, Ferag had no time to act. The stone block struck his head with great force, knocking him unconscious.



HE RECOVERED his senses in what seemed like a split second. He was standing on dusty scrubland, naked except for a rag made of woven grass tied loosely around his waist. A vast, murky red sun hovered near the horizon, producing a lurid sunset.

A circle of a dozen men stood around him. They were all looking at him with a sort of avid expectancy.

He looked back, searching one face after another, utterly bewildered.

Until the change came, sweeping through his mind in an unstoppable rush.

The memory of another life flooded into his mind. The life he had really lived. Not the life of the surgically adapted, battle-hardened ex-Space Marine he had thought himself to be, or of the glory-drenched Champion of Tzeentch who for uncounted centuries had faithfully served his master.

He was not a warrior at all. He had never left his native planet. His name was not even Killer-of-the-Lion-Wolf. He never could he have earned such a name, not even as a man, let alone as a boy! He was known as Ulf Dirt-Creeper, and he was acknowledged by all to be puny physically and a coward morally.

But he did belong to a Tzeentch coven. He had an aptitude for lying, cheating, and low cunning, for which the

worshippers of the Change God found uses. Now, however he had been found wanting. It was a small matter, really - he had been sent to murder a man in his sleep, an enemy of the coven, also his sister's husband, and he had been unable to find the courage. Now he stood condemned.

Condemned to end his life as Chaos spawn.

But because he had been of service in the past, Tzeentch had rendered him a final gift. In the last instants before he descended into mindlessness, he had been allowed to stand at the end of a completely different life, one of glory and power. Of course, he could not be allowed to retain the delusion to the end. That would be un-Tzeentchian. The cruel truth had to be revealed.

The coven leader was intoning a formula redolent of untold power in a high-pitched voice. Ulf Dirt-Creeper felt a horrid crawling sensation within him. He whimpered and flailed miserably. Despite himself, his body bent double. His hands touched the earth and became flat, flappy feet. He felt his face swelling into a round, ridiculous travesty of anything thought of as human. His mouth elongated into a long, narrow tube, not for drawing magical force out of his adversaries, but for sucking up the worms and grubs which were to be his only food from now on.

The awful mutation continued, playing out before the disgusted yet fascinated gazes of his fellow cult members. Then Ulf Dirt-Creeper recalled having heard, so long ago now, another name for Tzeentch: the Great Betrayer. Sometimes, instead of the promised spiritual reward, would come the greatest betrayal of all. Not Daemon Prince but...

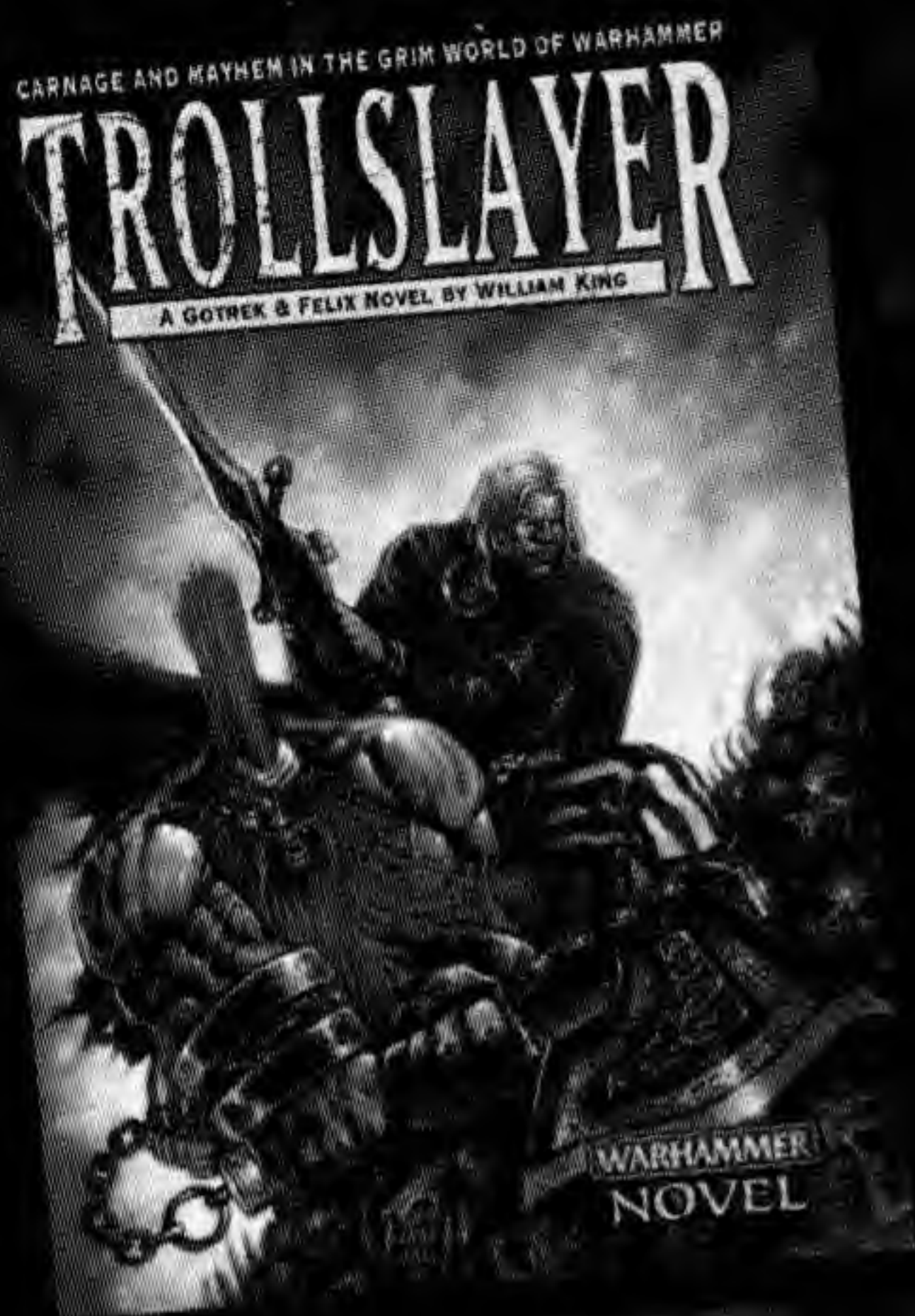
A burning question seized his petrified mind in the scant moments before it descended into gibbering insanity. Who was he, really? Ulf Dirt-Creeper or Ferag Lion-Wolf?

Which one is true?

Which one is true? ●



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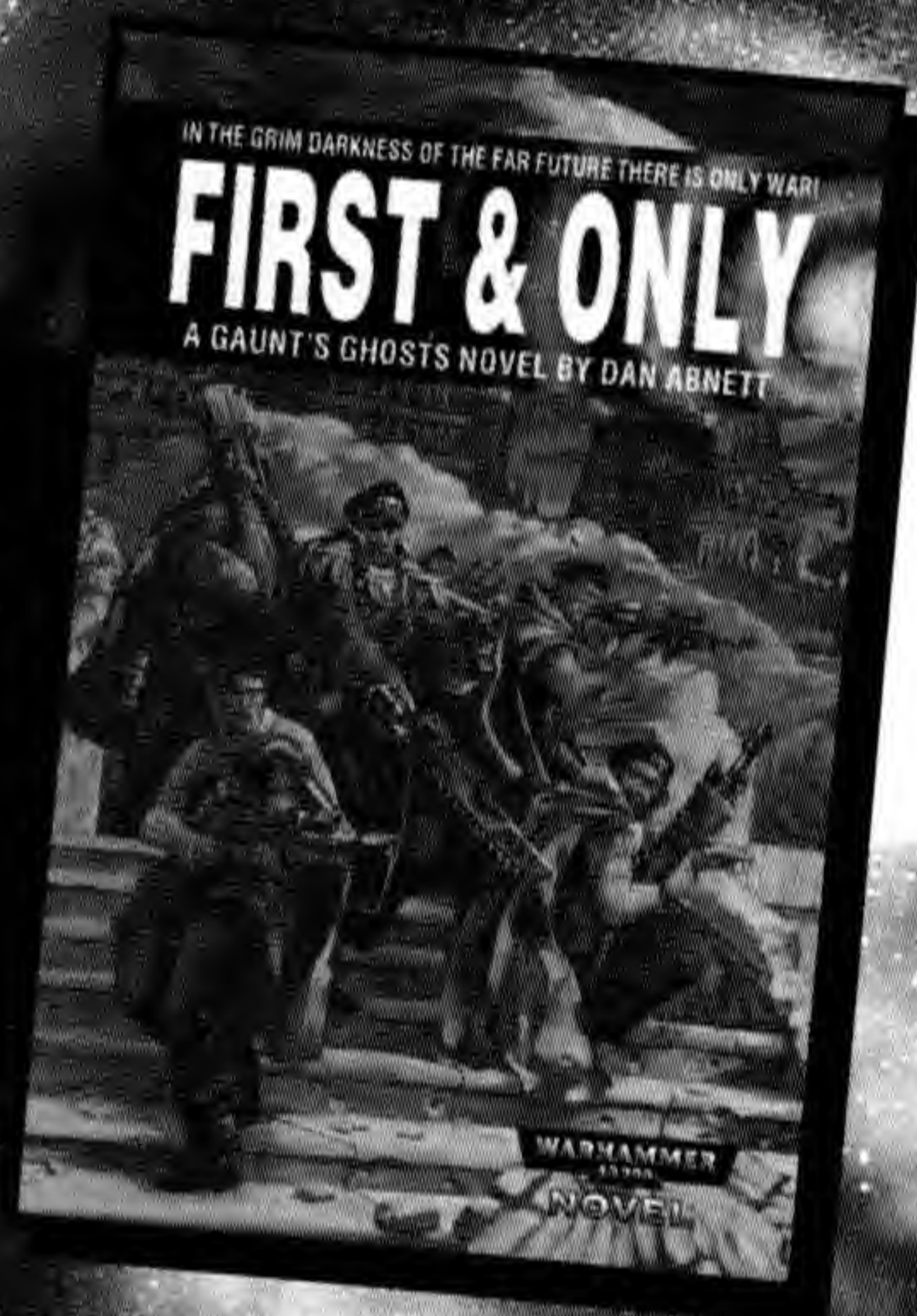
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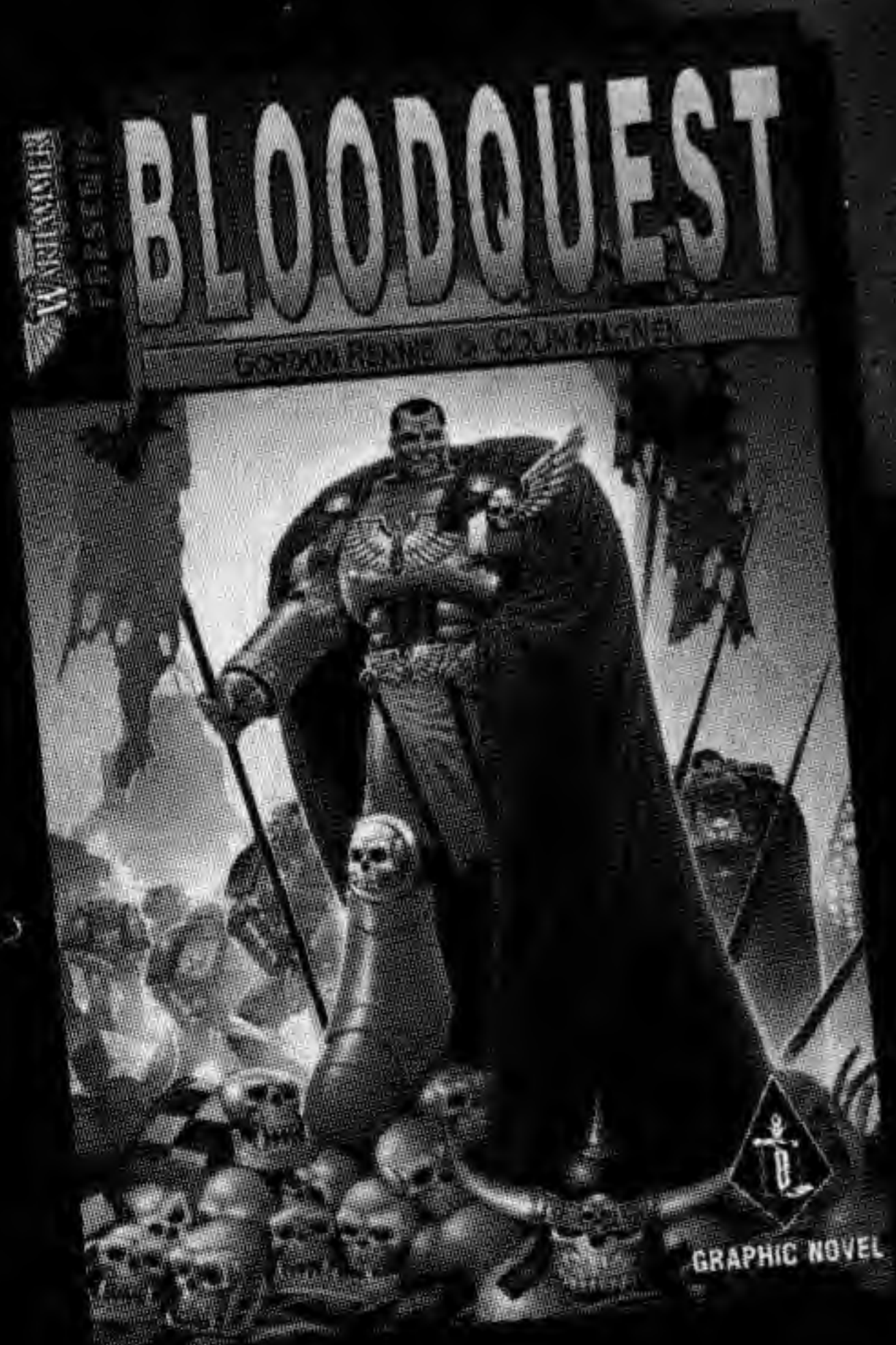
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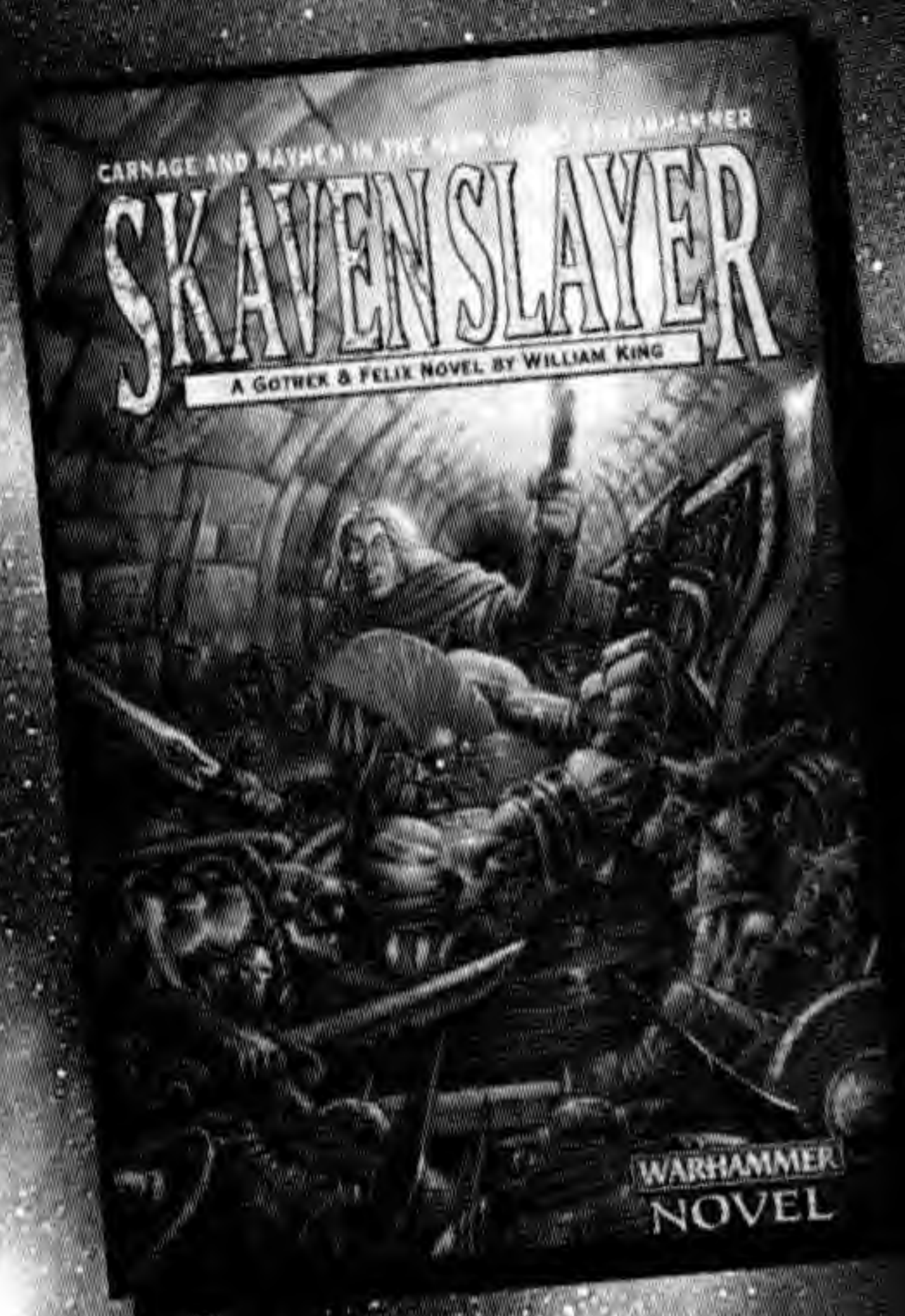
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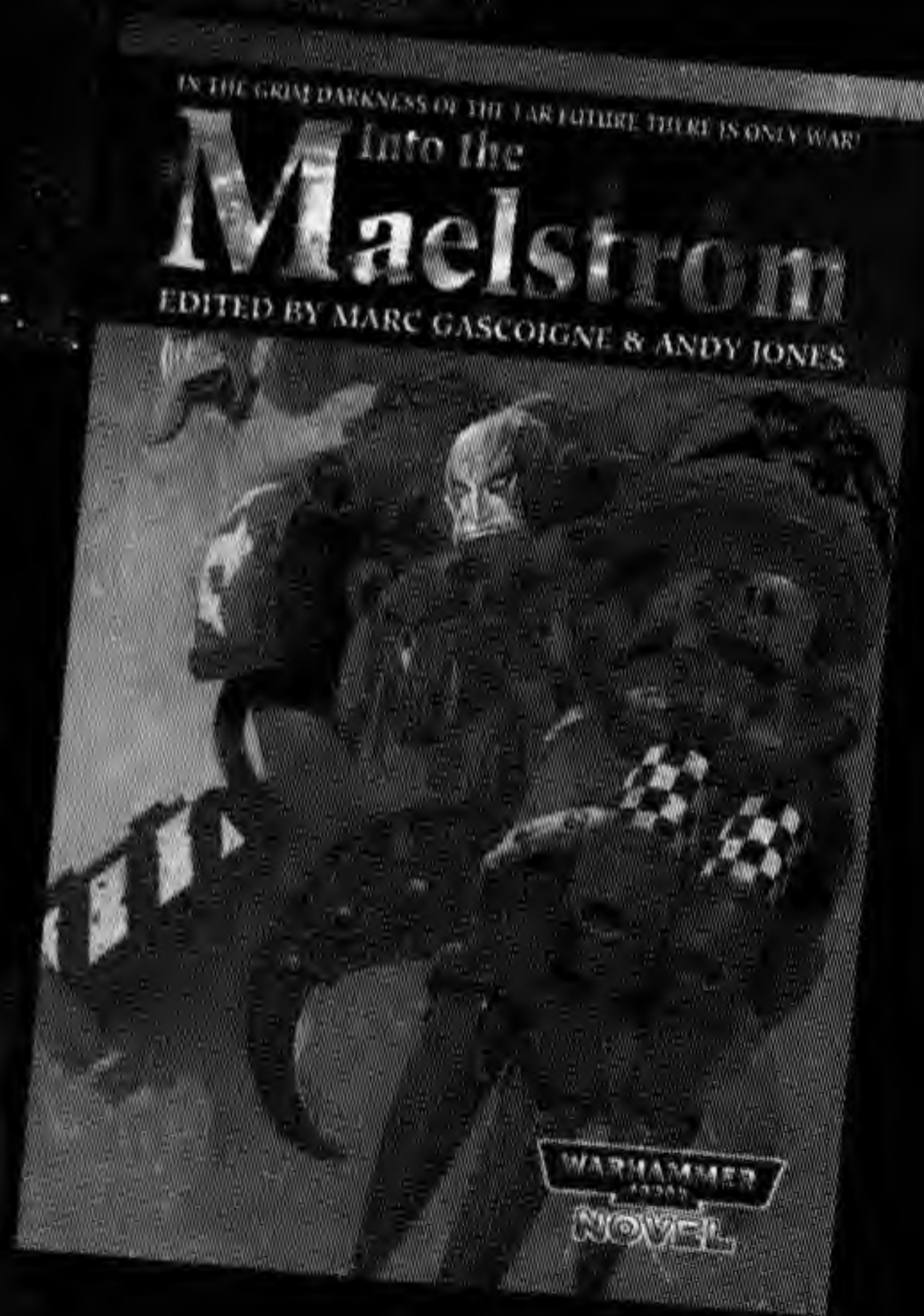
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RED MOON *Over* ALTDORF

Being a TALE *of* intrigue and
transformations MOST
terrible, as faithfully
recounted *by* your servant and
scribe, HERR Gordon Rennie.

BLADES, CRUEL and sharp, scratching on worn stone. Wan and sickly moonlight – Morrslight – ebbs down through a thin veil of clouds, casting shifting shadow patterns on the flagstoned street. Faint chimes ripple from the wind-stirred charms that superstitious fools hang in the doorways of their homes to ward off evil on the nights when Morrslieb waxes full. The killer stretches, enjoying the exquisite sensation of the magic-born light playing across its body. It shivers in delight, drawing new strength from the unholy radiation shining down upon it, and raises its head, already inhuman eyes altering to receive the invisible spectrum of secrets revealed only under the cold radiance of its heavenly patron. From its rooftop perch, it casts its magic-altered sight over the city below. The killer is old, ancient as its human cattle prey would reckon such things, and it has gazed out upon this scene many, many times before.

Revealed under the light of Morrslieb, it sees the many different incantations it has known of this one city. Images and scenes blur and overlap. Tower-shapes rise and fall across the shifting time spectrum as the killer's gaze takes it back through centuries of growth and destruction.

A blink, and it sees the city in flames as rival claimants to a vacant throne tear an empire apart in civil war. And it is there too, running in true-form amongst the rioting crowds that fill the streets. It moves freely amongst them, just another horror in a night full of them, snapping its jaws in hunger and pulling down victim after screaming victim. Raising its bloody snout from the throat of its latest kill, it lets out a howl of exhilaration to the red bright moon overhead.

A second blink, and it sees the city as a necropolis, cloaked in a pall of fear and despair as plague stalks its streets and decimates its population. Few lights bunt in the darkness – even the Imperial Palace lies dark and mostly deserted – and those that still live cower in their homes, waiting for the plague spectre to finally pass over the city. But the killer has no fear of mere disease and it prowls the empty streets unafraid, knowing that on this night none will dare venture out in answer to the screams of their neighbours.

The killer looks again, dimly glimpsing the very first incarnation of the city through the shades of all the others that came after. It sees a sunlit village on the banks of a wide fast-flowing river. It watches as the village's inhabitants run to greet a party of warriors returning from the woods. The killer's gaze is drawn to the tall figure at the head of the hunting party, a proud barbarian chieftain with hair like the sun and wielding a great dwarf's warhammer. The killer was much younger then, its mystic senses far cruder and undisciplined, but even back then it perceived the invisible nimbus of light surrounding the barbarian. The killer growled to itself, unsettled by the sight of this bright being, and slunk back off into the comforting darkness of the forest. Time and time again, in the many centuries to come, it would make sure

that the children of the tribe of Sigmar would pay for the shameful fear it first felt that day.

It shakes its heavy head, dispelling such visions, as it alters its gaze to a different spectrum. Now it sees the fatelines of so many human lives interconnecting across the face of the city, forming bright and confused patterns of colour and providence. Many such lines interconnect with itself, and one already fading line leads back to the torn, bleeding thing lying somewhere in the alleys below. The killer studies the patterns of lines radiating out from it, sensing the short and shallow lives of several soon-to-be victims who wait unsuspecting at the end of each one. Several of the fatelines lead promisingly towards the imposing shape of the Imperial Palace – the killer had always considered aristocratic blood to be a rare savoury treat – but one other intriguing possibility led off on a tangent towards the city city's academic quarter: a rambling maze of bookshops, libraries and dusty old sage-dens clustered around the University.

The killer studies this new fateline, its snout twitching in anticipation at the rich scent of the life at the other end of it. Its mouth fills with hot juices, its jaws dripping with drool as it considers the complexities – and promises – of this new challenge. This new hunt that has suddenly been revealed to it. A new hunt, but on familiar territory. Altdorf, its old – its very old – hunting ground, but one which never ceased to offer it something new every time it revisited the city every century or so.

The killer raises its snout and howls, offering up a prayer of thanks to its patron moon. Morrslieb, second moon of the Old World.

Red moon.

Killer's moon.

Chaos moon.



ZAVANT KONNIGER awoke with a start. There was the taste of something thick and unpleasant in his mouth, and he reached for the glass of red wine he kept by his bedside, cursing when he found it already empty. Mixed with certain herbs, the Reiklander wine made an effective sleeping draught, keeping at bay the dreams which often haunted him on nights such as this, nights when the Chaos Moon waxed strong. He sat up, the chill night air cooling the sweat that covered his face and he glanced out of the window, noticing with a sense of vague irritation that his ever-superstitious manservant had hung one of those moon-warding charms from the top sill of the open window. Morrslieb itself hung high in the sky, casting its baleful influence over the city below and filling Konniger's bedchamber with a strangely limpid, translucent light. Konniger's eyes ached in reaction to the otherworldly light. There was no mirror in the room, but he knew that if he could see his own reflection in the dark he would see a dull but unmistakable red glow in his eyes. He had made the study and opposition of Chaos his life's work, but on nights such as this he keenly felt the side-effects of the minute doses of warp-stuff which he had imbibed over the years in order to better understand the workings of his enemy.

Konniger gazed through the open window at the city beyond, his mind chasing the stray phantom memory of whatever premonition had awoken him from his sleep. He closed his eyes in concentration, seeing flashing teeth ripping into soft flesh and razor claws sparking off stone cobbles, but when he opened them again there was only the shimmering red disc of Morrslieb mocking him in the sky above. Something, he thought to himself. Something is abroad out there and stalking my city.

He reached for the rope-pull at the side of his bed, already throwing off the covers and grabbing the robes lying nearby. After a moment, from far downstairs, he could hear his servant Vido's footsteps and muttering voice coming up the stairs in

answer to the ringing bell. Konniger paused to smile to himself. For someone who was once reputedly the stealthiest cut-purse in the Empire, the Halfling could make quite a racket when he wanted to broadcast his unhappiness at being roused in the middle of the night.

Vido opened the door, the light from the candle in his hand intensifying the ache in the sage-detective's eyes and causing him to flinch in discomfort. 'You rang?' Vido grumbled, in his best disgruntled servant tone.

'I fear our services will soon be called upon before the night is out, Vido. Give my courtier robes a dust down and put on that servant's livery suit that I know you hate wearing so much. Both of us must look our best when the messenger from the Imperial Palace arrives.'



VIDO WAS UNHAPPY. He was unhappy at being up and about at such an early hour. He was very unhappy at finding himself in a stinking back alley that only a few hours before had apparently been used as a convenient stopover point by every late night reveller on their way home from an evening of over-indulgence at the nearby Street of a Thousand Taverns. He would normally have been deeply unhappy that he hadn't yet eaten today, but the sight of the mutilated corpse lying at the far end of the alley had since made all immediate thought of food a queasy and unappealing prospect. He was truly unhappy at being surrounded by so many members of the City Watch, even if a cordon of them, cudgels at the ready, were keeping at bay the restless mob that went part in parcel with any unusual event on the streets of the capital of the Empire. Most of all, he was truly unhappy at the monkey suit servant's uniform that Konniger had insisted he wear for the occasion, and for seemingly the hundredth time that morning he tugged uncomfortably at the stiff collar which

constantly chaffed against his neck. Zavant Konniger, deep in conversation with the dark-cloaked figure kneeling over the corpse, certainly gave no indication of noticing his servant's unhappiness.

'They do say, Herr Konniger, that one can sometimes discern the identity of a killer by staring into the eyes of the cadaver, with the last thing the victim saw – the face of their killer – imprinted forever on the retina of the eyes.' The witch hunter looked up expectantly from where he knelt over the corpse, waiting to gauge Konniger's reaction.

Konniger met the gaunt witch hunter's gaze, not shying away from the casual challenge. 'Indeed. I have heard similar notions. As I have also heard the theory that a system could be devised to identify criminals from the patterns and marks on the skin on the tips of their fingers, with every criminal unwittingly leaving their own invisible but identifiable signature at the scene of each crime. If only such fanciful notions were true, Herr van Sandt, then perhaps both our duties would be far less taxing. Not that your observation would have much bearing in this particular case, since the killer has seen fit to remove not only most of the victim's face, but also both of his eyes.'

Vido had seen witch hunters do various unusual things in his time. He had seen them foaming at the mouth in a blaze of righteous anti-heretical fury. He had seen flay the skin off their own backs in a zealous display of the joys of purification and self-chastisement. He had seen them weep and gnash their teeth in woeful despair as one heretic after another confessed their guilt. He had even seen one witch hunter once show some rare mercy and allow a heretic to be garrotted at the stake before the flames even reached them. But this one here, this Marius van Sandt, Imperial-Appointed Witch Hunter and Blessed of Sigmar, actually did something that Vido had seen none of his kind ever do before. He smiled. Not the thin-lipped smile of secret pleasure that often flickered across a witch hunter's face during the torture of suspected evildoers, but a genuine smile

of amusement, one that spread all the way to his dark glittering eyes.

The witch hunter stepped forward, taking care, Vido noted, to keep his trailing cloak clear of the pool of congealed blood around the corpse, and extended a handshake to Konniger. 'A pleasure to finally meet you, Herr Konniger. Your name and work is familiar even to an uncultured fanatic such as myself. In particular, I have found your notes on Gottlieb the Stern's Treatise Necris and the theories you advanced in your own Principia Chaotica to be of much use to me in my own work.'

Konniger smiled – Vido knew that intellectual flattery was one of his master's main weaknesses – and gave a nod of pleased acknowledgement as he took van Sandt's proffered handshake. 'You give me too much credit, Herr van Sandt. As Leonardo da Mirigliano was reputed to have said, "If I have seen further than others, it is only because I have stood upon the shoulders of giants".'

The witch hunter had been here since before they arrived, apparently summoned to the crime scene by the same Palace decree that had roused Konniger and Vido out of their beds so early this morning. Witch hunters were rare in Altdorf, Vido knew. The Church of Sigmar had its headquarters here, and, while the often overzealous heretic hunters were free to ply their business in many of the more distant rural provinces of the Empire, here in the capital the Church preferred to deal with such matters itself. That someone within the Imperial Palace had seen fit to allow a witch hunter to operate on the streets of Altdorf was unusual enough, but it was the presence of an even more ominous figure in the alley that troubled Vido the most. He still remembered the shock of recognition that ran through him as he and Konniger had arrived at the scene under escort and had caught their first glimpse of the grey-garbed figure waiting for them at the entrance to the alley.

Steiner! he had thought, with a thrill of fear. Ranald's teeth, whatever business

we've got ourselves mixed up in now, things must be serious indeed if someone has seen fit to let the Emperor's pet hunting hound off its leash!

Officially, Vaul Steiner was merely the Emperor's personal bodyguard. Unofficially, and in an open secret known by everyone in Altdorf, he was the Emperor's personal assassin, one of the most feared killers in the Empire and a man who had sworn his loyalty wholly and completely to the Imperial House. Steiner's skills with sword, dagger and crossbow were legendary, and Vido and the rest of Altdorf had seen him out-fence and out-shoot every challenger at the public games held every year in the Kaiserplatz to celebrate the Emperor's birthday. However, Vido had also heard the stories of the many other skills Steiner exhibited, in the torture chambers beneath the palace, where it was rumoured that he could keep a suspect alive and in agony for weeks if necessary – until they would gladly implicate their own children in a plot against the Emperor if it would mean that Steiner would grant them the quick death for which they had been begging.

Right on cue, Vido heard the soft scrape of the Imperial assassin's hunting boots on the cobblestones behind him. In his worn boots, plain and threadbare clothes and patched cloak, the Imperial assassin looked every inch the forest huntsman he once was as he swept along the alley towards Konniger and the witch hunter. Vido instinctively shrunk himself against the rough brickwork of one of the alley walls, meriting no more than a casual glance from the assassin as he passed by. Looking into Steiner's cold grey eyes for a second, Vido remembered what the members of his old thieves' fraternity used to whisper about the sinister Reiklander. He never forgets a face, Steiner. One look at you, and he's got you measured up and marked away in his mind for the rest of your days.

The assassin stopped short before the two figures bent down over the corpse, neither of them apparently noticing him. He shifted uneasily and loudly cleared his throat to catch their attention. 'Good

sirs,' he growled, in a voice akin to those of the wolves he once hunted in the wild forests of the Reikland. 'If you have finished your inspection of the cadaver, I have a carriage waiting to take you to the palace. His Excellency the Lord Chamberlain awaits your findings with much impatience.'



IT WAS DARK in the Chamberlain's personal state rooms. The thick drapes were closed, as was often the tradition on the days surrounding Morrsliebnacht, when the Chaos Moon was visible in the day sky and even the sunlight had a pale and unhealthy quality to it. The only light came from the lit fireplace, before which sat the hunched figure of the occupant of the room. Konniger and van Sandt sat facing him and Konniger could sense the grey shadowy presence of Steiner standing silently but no doubt alertly somewhere behind him. The chamberlain leaned forward, pouring himself a glass of the familiar sickly sweet mulled wine which Konniger remembered so well.

Konniger looked at the gnarled and withered hand holding the wine goblet. The Iron Graf, they called him, he thought. Old and weak he may be now, but there was still a soul forged in iron within that failing body.

Graf Otto von Bitternach, Lord Chamberlain to both Emperor Karl-Franz and his father Emperor Luitpold before him, settled into his great leather-padded chair and sipped loudly at the goblet of wine in his shaking hands. He was a small wizened man, his sunken eyes rheumy with age and only a few wisps of white hair left on his bald, liver-spotted head, but Konniger wasn't fooled. He had heard that the wily old spymaster and diplomat sometimes affected an air of senility these days, but the Iron Graf's position at the heart of Imperial politics was as secure now as it had been for the past half century. If Vaul Steiner was the Emperor's favourite hunting hound, then

the Graf was the packmaster who had bred and trained him for the role.

'You have examined the corpse, no doubt?' Graf Otto rasped, looking at Konniger. 'What are your conclusions?'

Konniger set down his wineglass and composed himself before answering. 'Foul play has been committed, certainly. But it was not a robbery-turned-murder. The victim had wealth – we found letters of credit on him identifying him as a grain merchant from Marienburg – but his killer left a full purse of gold behind him. And Altdorf's footpads and cut-purses may be an occasionally bloodthirsty lot, but I have yet to meet one who would make a habit of ripping out his victims' throats with his bare teeth.'

'Surely it is the work of some wild animal, then? Some beast loose within the city walls?'

Konniger paused, sensing that he was being tested here. 'Animals kill for food. Whatever killed this poor unfortunate did so only for its own savage pleasure. The fleshier parts of the corpse were untouched and the fact that the killer removed the victim's face – stripped it clean away from the bone, indeed – suggests that some greater and much more malign intelligence than that of some simple hungry forest predator is at work here. I assume, of course, that there have been other victims previous to this one?'

Konniger's sudden question was directed at Graf Otto, but it was the until-now silent figure of the witch hunter who answered. 'Six in the past four nights. Despite our best efforts to keep the connections between all these killings a secret, there are already rumours of a daemon creature loose in the city.'

'But it will not have escaped the Graf's notice that the period of these killings coincides exactly with the current time of Morrsliebnacht?'

Graf Otto nodded to himself, tufting in approval at Konniger's observation. 'Ha! What a disappointment you have been to me, Zavant. I groom you for great things, only to see you join the priesthood. And then, to add insult to injury, after you

finally come to your senses and leave those holy fools to their prayer-mumbling, you take up the life of a hermit and busy yourself with the dry scribblings of heretics and lunatics! If your life stands for anything, it is the waste of a fine mind. The only reason I have stayed alive this long is because I still hold out some hope that you will finally see sense and once again take up your rightful place in the service of the Empire.'

As if to emphasise his point, the Graf's body was suddenly wracked by a series of coughing spasms. Konniger stepped forward to attend to his former mentor, but the ancient old spymaster waved him away with a gesture of irritation, reaching for his wineglass and slurping thirstily at it. Noisily clearing his throat, he continued. 'Morrslieb, yes. We have long known of the correlation between the phases of the Chaos Moon and the ebb and flow of the strength of the Dark Powers.' At this, Graf Otto's fingers briefly made the sign of the Hammer of Sigmar. Despite his professed scorn for the priesthood of the Cult of Sigmar, Konniger observed, the pragmatic old realpolitiker still instinctively made the traditional ward of protection gesture when speaking of the Ruinous Powers. 'As its brother Mannslieb influences the tides, so too does its darker twin exert its own effect, but on the minds of men rather than the rise and fall of the oceans.'

'Indeed,' Konniger agreed, feeling the Graf's expectant gaze upon him. 'Any City Watchman can tell stories of "Morrslieb Madness": of the lawlessness and fits of violent dementia that seems to seize many of our citizens at the time of Morrsliebnacht. But my own studies tell me that there is more to the effects of the Chaos Moon than a mere increase in offences against public order. When the Red Moon lies high in the night sky, many unnatural things emerge from the shadows to bask in its unholy radiance, and I fear that something far more malefic than some moon-crazed madman has come to Altdorf.'

Graf Otto sank back into his chair, gesturing towards the witch hunter. 'That

is what Herr van Sandt thought, when he first came to me. For months now he has been following the ravages of some unnatural predator – a were-beast, he believed – across the northern reaches of the Empire. The trail led steadily south, and it is his belief that the creature is now in Altdorf. I have granted Herr van Sandt dispensation to operate here in the capital but it is his suggestion that you too join the hunt. After all, when pursuing a creature of Chaos in a tangled and unfamiliar city, who better to call upon than the renowned Zavant Konniger, sage-detective and tireless chronicler of the many vile ways of the servants of evil?'

Konniger looked directly at the witch hunter, his mind still reeling at what he had just been told. 'A were-beast? A lycanthrope? I thought them all centuries extinct within the borders of the Empire. Gottlieb the Stern claimed to have wiped out the last nest of them during his Great Cleansing of Sylvania in 2158.'

The witch hunter nodded grimly. 'Aye, and so I thought also. But I have seen the evidence for myself and I have to say, the signs are unmistakable.' He paused, meeting Konniger's steady gaze. 'It would seem that for once that the Stern was as fallible as the rest of us humble servants of Sigmar.'

Konniger lowered his head in thought, then looked towards his mentor. 'And we are to hunt down and destroy this killer, this were-beast?'

'Hunt down, yes. Destroy, no,' the Graf rasped, indicating Steiner, who had glided silently out of the shadows at his master's summons. 'Steiner will be joining you in the hunt. You will be my bloodhounds, Zavant, seeking out the quarry and running it to ground. But Steiner knows everything there is to know about the killing of both men and beasts. This creature – this man-beast – will not be such a new challenge for a hunter of his abilities.'

In the glow of the light from the fireplace, Konniger could see the look in the eyes of his old mentor. Graf Otto had faithfully served his beloved Empire for

half a century and in that time had this frail old man had signed thousands of death warrants, overseen the torture of countless suspects, ordered the assassination of hundreds of enemies of the Emperor. And Konniger knew, too, that on every one of those occasions, this venerable hero of the Empire had had the same look in his eyes as he had now; the cold determination that comes with the brutal and calculated exercise of power.

‘Understand this, Zavant. This is no mere murder hunt I am setting you on. All my life, I have served the Empire, and the Empire stands for Order. This city is the heart of the Empire, but now a daemon-beast – a creature of the Darkness – stalks its streets under the light of the Red Moon. The Chaos Moon is in the ascendancy, and our citizens are afraid. They see Chaos winning out over Order, and perhaps they begin to question the laws and traditions – the foundations of that Order which bind the Empire together. If such seeds of doubt take root here in the Imperial Capital, then they will soon spread, and the Empire of Sigmar – the Empire that has now endured for over twenty-five centuries – will have been fatally weakened. This I will not allow to happen.’

The old man reached out his bony hand, grasping Konniger tightly by the wrist and pulling him close. ‘Find this daemon, Zavant, and quickly. Find it, and dispel the shadow of fear that hangs over Altdorf.’



OFFICIALLY, VIDO had never been inside the Imperial Palace before. Unofficially, in his former capacity as one of the most celebrated thieves in Altdorf, Vido had been here any number of times before, and was well-acquainted with the layout of the huge and imposing fortress. The seat of Imperial power always held rich pickings for any thief daring enough to test their wits against the Palace Guard, and, in moments

dedicated more to pleasure than business, he had also made numerous night-time excursions to the bedchambers of a certain Halfling scullery maid who had once worked in the palace kitchens...

He sighed, wishing he was back there now rather than waiting here in a draughty antechamber with the imposing shapes of two of his old adversaries of the Palace Guard glowering suspiciously down at him. It was with a great sense of relief that he saw the doors to the room beyond suddenly swing open, the guards stiffening to attention as the cloaked figures of Konniger and the witch hunter swept out of the room, followed by the silent shadow-form of Vaul Steiner. Vido instinctively shrunk away from the Imperial assassin and then hurried down the corridor in pursuit of his master, who was deep in conversation with the witch hunter.

‘Your thoughts, Herr Konniger?’ van Sandt asked.

‘Tonight is the night of true Morrsliebnacht, when the Red Moon’s cycle reaches its peak and the power of Chaos will be in full ascendancy,’ Konniger noted. ‘If the old tales are true, then the were-beast’s bloodlust will be almost uncontrollable. It must kill tonight, repeatedly and in ways as savage and as shocking as possible.’

‘Agreed,’ the witch hunter said. ‘I have ordered all City Watchmen and members of the Palace Guard on duty tonight. It is to our advantage that few honest citizens will dare venture out on Morrsliebnacht. There may be more armed guards than citizens on the streets of Altdorf tonight. With any luck, a show of strength may deter the creature from seeking out its further victims.’

‘Perhaps,’ the sage-detective said. ‘But I would much rather catch and destroy it than merely frighten it off.’

Van Sandt paused, looking speculatively at Konniger. ‘You have another plan, Herr Konniger?’

‘Not so much a plan,’ Konniger answered. ‘But I have always found it a wise precaution to try and learn

something of the true nature of the enemy. Make your arrangements for the guard patrols. I shall join you later for our night vigil.'

'Where are you going, Herr Konniger?' Vido heard the witch hunter call out after them, as he followed his master as he hurried along the corridor.

'Where else would one go to learn the secrets of the servants of Chaos?' Konniger said. 'Where else, but to the madhouse?'



SOMEWHERE in the dark, the killer snarled to itself in pleasure. It stretched, chafing against the confines of the body in which it hid. Soon the Red Moon would rise as night fell over the city. Soon it would be free again. The prey had been found and the bait had been taken. Soon it would feed.

Soon.



INSANITY SEEMED to be a peculiarly human phenomenon, thought Vido, as he followed his master along the dark stone passageways of the asylum. It was almost unknown amongst his own race, although there were many back home in the Moot who would have judged Vido himself mad after he left the family brewing business – helping himself to a generous advance on his inheritance from his father's cash box – and ran off to seek his fortune on the streets of Altdorf. Vido shivered. No matter how dull and sedate the pace of life in the rural backwaters of the Moot, it was surely preferable to the atmosphere inside Altdorf city asylum on Morrsliebnacht.

The passageways echoed with the screams, moans and gibbering cries of the insane. A filthy and emaciated hand suddenly reached out through the bars of a nearby cell and clutched desperately at the hem of Vido's cloak. 'Help me, help

me!' croaked the dark shape on the other side of the bars, in a voice clearly struggling to remember the proper sounds of human speech. 'Everything is dark here, and I cannot see the night sky. Take this back outside with you, I beg you, and let me gaze upon the face of the moon once more!'

With a lurch of revulsion, Vido looked down and saw the gristly object staring up at him from the palm of the madman's bloody and outstretched hand. Vido recoiled in horror, almost falling under the feet of Klebb the Jailer. Snarling in anger, the asylum keeper thrust his burning torch through the bars of the cell. There was a scream of pain, and the outstretched hand disappeared from sight, the madman retreating into a dark corner whimper and crying. Crying from the one eye he had still left for himself.

'My apologies, good sirs,' the giant figure of the madhouse jailer growled, pulling Vido roughly to his feet. 'It's the same every Morrsliebnacht. We keep the worst ones locked up down here where there are no windows, but somehow they still know when it is the time of the Red Moon.'

'And the Bretonnian?' Konniger asked, stepping aside as they reached the locked door at the very end of the passageway. 'How do the phases of the Red Moon affect him?'

Klebb made an ugly grunting noise at the back of his throat – Vido half-suspected that there may be some Orc blood somewhere in the brutal jailer's ancestry – and drew open the bolts of the door. 'Him? He just sits quiet in his cell and writes. All the time, since the day he got here. We don't give him any paper, not since one of the priests saw what it was he was working on, but that don't stop him writing.'

The jailer heaved the door open and stepped aside, allowing Konniger and Vido to enter into the cell beyond and see for themselves what he had meant. Vido stifled a cry of disbelief. The rough stone surfaces of the cell – the floor, the walls, even parts of the ceiling – were covered in scratched writing, every flowing word

and character stroke painstakingly etched into the stonework. The author of this demented text crouched on the floor in the middle of the room, using a small metal fork, worn away to nothing more than a fine sliver, to put the finishing touches to his latest couplet. He worked by the dim light of a sole candle, and his long blond hair fell lankly over his face, hiding his features, but Vido did not need to see his aristocratic profile to know who he was. Valois de Simone, the infamous 'Mad Poet of Moussillon' now confined here at His Imperial Majesty's Pleasure after the church authorities deemed his last collection of works to be Chaos-inspired heresy. Konniger had defended the young poet at his trial, and Vido knew that it was only because of his master's intervention that the crazed genius had to be sentenced to the madhouse rather than the stake.

'Herr Konniger? I trust you are well?' The poet spoke without looking up, his refined Bretonnian accent smoothly rounding off the rough sounds of the guttural Reikspiel of the Empire. 'I prefer not to receive callers when I am working, but I am always willing to make an exception in your case. I take it you have come to consult with me concerning le loup garou, the were-beast?'

Vido and Konniger exchanged glances. Madmen and poets were all the same to the pragmatic Halfling, but Vido knew that Konniger considered the Bretonnian to be special, his madness and his genius combining with his morbidly poetic imagination to give him many strange insights into the workings of the Ruinous Powers. 'Un savant fou' was how Konniger had once referred to the poet, although Vido, who prided himself on not knowing a word of Bretonnian, had no idea what his master had meant.

'You have something to tell me, Valois?' the sage-detective asked, knowing that the mad poet's answers were always, at best, vague and elliptical.

'Of les loupes garoux? What would a simple poet know of such things? Go ask a witch hunter, if you would hear tales of such horrors. But it is Morrsliebnacht, is

it not? I have been of writing a poem about the two moons. Have you ever thought about them, Herr Konniger? Mannslieb and Morrslieb, chasing each other forever round the heavens, neither one sure which one is the prey and which one is the pursuer. It is a curious relationship, is it not?'

The poet muttered something to himself, seemingly distracted by whatever it was he was scratching into the stonework of the floor. Konniger waited patiently, knowing there was more to come. 'Which of the two moons interests you the most, Valois?'

'Oh, most definitely Morrslieb,' the poet answered. 'It is the darkest and most mysterious of the two. One face – its dark side – remains forever hidden from us. But even its more visible face is ever-changing, different every time we see it each Morrsliebnacht. Perhaps it only has one face, its dark face, and all the others that we see are but masks to conceal this fact from us? An interesting thought, is it not, Herr Konniger?'

Konniger waited, but soon even Vido sensed that the interview was over. The sage-detective bowed politely, although if the madman saw it, he did not acknowledge the gesture. 'My thanks, Valois. As ever, it has been an enlightening experience. Is there anything I may do for you in return?'

'They allow me no paper, but fresh writing tools would be much appreciated,' called out the poet as his visitors exited from the cell. 'My last quill is almost worn away to nothing, and I fear I will have to start using my fingernails before very much longer!'

'Enlightening...' Vido muttered once they were safely out of the cell, with Klebb securely locking the door behind them. 'How could you find anything "enlightening" in the drivel said by that madman?'

Konniger smiled, clearly anticipating Vido's reaction to what they had just experienced. 'On the contrary, my dear Vido, there is much method to Valois's madness, if you have the proper sense to listen to what he is trying to tell you. And

poor insane Valois was very much trying to tell me something – to warn me, even, in his own misguided way. Indeed, he has only added to certain suspicions I have had since the very beginning of this aff–’

He broke off suddenly, sensing something that Vido could not. (Even after all these years, it still irritated Vido that his master – a mere human, for Ranald’s sake! – had sharper senses than he, a Halfling thief of no little skill.) A split-second later, and Vido heard it too: men in armour, descending the dungeon stairs towards them. A half-minute later, and they met two out-of-breath members of the Palace Guard at the foot of the narrow stairs.

‘Herr Konniger!’ puffed one of them, a ruddy-faced Reiklander sergeant. ‘A message from the witch hunter, Herr van Sandt. You must come at once. The creature has struck already tonight!’



KONIGPLATZ was the very heart of Altdorf, the great open square where spectacles of all kinds – military parades, official proclamations, feast day fairs, the weekly public executions – were held. Normally, it would be full of life even at this late hour, but tonight it was deserted save for the ring of guardsmen and city militia which had now sealed it off from the rest of the city. Vido could hear the guardsmen’s shouts to each other through the thick river mists that cloaked the city, see their lantern lights bobbing as they spread out in search of the killer which had no doubt long ago left the scene of its latest savage crime.

Vido turned back to the scene behind him, breathing hard through his mouth to avoid the thick smell of blood that pervaded the air. Before him towered the imposing statue of Magnus the Pious, saviour of the Empire who more than five centuries ago had turned back the tide of Chaos that had threatened to engulf all the Old World. The statue of Emperor Magnus I stood in its rightful place at the

top of the square, its arms held out in a protective blessing. Only now the figure was smeared from head to foot in blood, and its arms and open hands were hung with human offal, making it seem as though the statue was making its own obscene offering to the citizens of Altdorf. At the foot of the statue’s plinth lay a tangle of dismembered bodies, over which crouched Vido’s master and the figure of the witch hunter.

‘Three of our own – three dead militiamen of the City Watch – and the defilement of a memorial to one of the Empire’s greatest heroes here in the very heart of the city,’ van Sandt said, holding his cloak to his face to avoid the smell of human butchery. ‘The creature could not have made its point more clear!’

‘It is mocking us,’ Konniger agreed grimly. ‘And Graf Otto was right. Its purpose is something far greater than simple bloody slaughter. Where is our huntsman, Steiner?’

‘Checking on the patrols in the vicinity of the palace. I have sent word–’

The witch hunter was silenced by the sound of alarmed shouting came from somewhere across the other side of the square. A panicked guardsman came running towards them out of the misty gloom. ‘It’s struck again! Two more dead in Luitpold Strasse... and they’re both still warm!’

Van Sandt drew his sword and turned to Konniger. ‘Then the creature must still be close. Come, Herr Konniger, we have no time to waste! We’ll cut around through Dietrich Alley and Rasenplatz. If we hurry we may yet come upon it unawares!’ The witch hunter followed the guardsman back into the chill mists, still calling for Konniger to follow him.

Vido looked in confusion at his master, who had conjured parchment and quill from somewhere inside his voluminous robes and was frantically scribbling something down. ‘We aren’t going with him?’

‘I am – but you’re not,’ Konniger said, pressing the folded note into Vido’s hand. ‘Find Steiner and make sure he reads this. If he’s coming from the palace then you’ll

probably be able to catch him at the Ostlander Bridge. And hurry, Vido – I am delivering my life into your hands!’

Vido stared at the folded note, a feeling of uneasy realisation growing within him. When he looked up a scant second later, his master had already disappeared into the gloom after the witch hunter.



VAN SANDT!’ Konniger started visibly as the witch hunter suddenly loomed up before him from out of the murk. The witch hunter’s cloak was torn, and the sage-detective saw blood seeping between van Sandt’s fingers where they clutched at the wound on his arm.

‘I saw it, Konniger!’ van Sandt gasped, indicating with his sword blade-towards a nearby narrow alley. ‘It came out of the darkness at me and then disappeared down there!’

‘Where are the guardsmen?’ Konniger asked, noticing the oppressive silence all around them. They were in the heart of the most populous city in the Old World, and yet it was as if the rest of the world around them had simply melted away into the darkness and the mists.

‘I lost them in this damnable mist. But then I sensed something nearby, something stalking me. You don’t spend a lifetime hunting the servants of Evil without being able to know when one is close by, Konniger! It came at me – perhaps I struck it with my sword, I don’t know -but it fled down this alley. Come, we can only be seconds behind it!’

Van Sandt ran down the alley, the sage-detective just a few steps behind. Konniger knew the area. The Reikerbahn: a maze-like sinkhole of cheap beer halls and bordellos, beggar’s hovels and thieves’ dens clustered behind the main waterfront area of the docks, but the mist was at its worst here this close to the river. Now even Konniger, whose knowledge of the tumbledown back alleys and hidden byways of the city was near unparalleled, quickly lost his

bearings in this mist-choked warren. But the witch hunter ran unerringly on, following the invisible trail of the creature he had now tracked across half the Empire.

It was only when the mud and human filth of the back alleys of the Reikerbahn gave way to ancient worn cobblestones that Konniger realised just where they were surely heading. The Necropolis, the abandoned Old City cemetery which lay on the far side of the Reikerbahn. The history of the Old World was full of tales of the ravages of necromancers, vampire counts and armies of the undead, and it was little surprise that in every human city, the areas surrounding cemeteries were naturally shunned by all but the poorest and most desperate.

Or creatures of Chaos, thought Konniger, who would find the perfect lairs in such places. Close to their prey, but where few would willingly venture to seek them out.

The two men made their way through the broken and unguarded gates. The place had been abandoned centuries ago, and there was nothing left here to interest graverobbers or bodysnatchers. The necropolis had been built on a rise overlooking the Reikerbahn, and was mercifully above the reach of the river-mists. Up here, the night sky could be clearly seen and the Red Moon dominated the heavens, casting its strange light down upon an eerie and lifeless landscape of tumbled gravestones, empty looted tombs and tangles of thick thorny undergrowth. Ahead of them loomed the dark shape of some large pillared sepulchre at the centre of the necropolis. As they drew nearer, van Sandt paused, pointing his sword blade towards it.

‘The tomb of Gottlieb the Stern, Konniger!’ the witch hunter breathed. ‘It was his wish that his spirit be laid to rest here, watching over the citizens of the Empire in death just as he had watched over them in life. That is where the fiend has made its lair, defiling it just as it did the statue of Magnus the Pious. It is close now, waiting for us there!’

‘Indeed...’ Konniger murmured. ‘Perhaps far closer than we realise. I must say, your knowledge of the alleyways and older parts of the city continually surprises me, Herr van Sandt. I had thought Graf Otto said that you were a stranger to Altdorf?’

‘Then the Graf must have been mistaken,’ came the witch hunter’s cold reply. ‘Although admittedly it has been some time – many years, in fact – since I was last here.’

The witch hunter turned, until he and Konniger faced each other amidst the desolation of the crumbling tombs.

‘Ah, that is what I thought,’ Konniger nodded, as if to himself. ‘I am still curious, though: the two still-warm corpses in Luitpold Strasse – how did you manage to kill them when you were still with me in Konigplatz at the time?’

The thing which called itself Marius van Sandt smiled to itself, its lips stretching too wide across its face and displaying the rows of extra teeth now pushing through its bloody gums. ‘Of course, I had killed them hours before. It is a simple spell to keep warm the blood in their veins, and only a slightly more taxing one to keep them hidden from sight until their “discovery” suited my purpose. One picks up many such tricks when one has lived as long as I have.’

Keep it talking, Konniger thought, trying to push even that idea from the front of his mind. Don’t let it know what you are thinking. Who knows how far its supernatural senses may extend? ‘And the real van Sandt?’ he asked casually, his level voice giving no hint of the turmoil of his thoughts.

‘Months dead,’ the were-beast grinned, its voice coarsening as its face stretched to accommodate the new shape of its emerging wolf snout. ‘I allowed him to think that it was him who was actually the hunter and I the hunted, but I grew weary of the game and brought it to an abrupt end in the Drakwald. He was a dull opponent, if truth be told, but it amused me for a while to assume his form and pretend to pursue myself until I could find some worthier prey.’

Konniger gave a mock bow of his head, surreptitiously reaching into the folds of his robes. ‘Then I suppose I should be honoured. Am I to assume that, as with poor van Sandt, you intend to consume not only my flesh but also my identity?’

‘But of course,’ the wolf-thing snarled, drooling in pleasure. ‘Few doors are barred to the famous Zavant Konniger. Perhaps tomorrow I shall visit the palace to pay my respects to my old mentor, Graf Otto. Or maybe even the Emperor himself will grant me a private audience to hear the truth of how I hunted down and destroyed the daemon-creature which had been stalking his city!’

Konniger had been bracing himself for the moment of full transformation. He hadn’t quite known what to expect – a drawn-out metamorphosis as man-shape altered into that of wolf, or a bloody and savage rebirth as the beast within burst out of its human prison – but the moment, when it came, was shocking in its suddenness. Van Sandt stepped forward, his outline momentarily blurring and then there was only the wolf-thing, leaping hungrily towards Konniger as the witch hunter’s now-empty cloak and vestments fell to the ground behind it. Konniger was almost fatally caught by surprise. Almost, but not quite.

Powdered silver was a vital component in many spell workings – the wolf-thing was not the only one who knew a few spell tricks – and Konniger habitually carried a small pouch of the stuff with him. He had used it before to cast wards of protection against evil, but this was the first time he had used it as a weapon directly against evil, drawing open the pouch and throwing its contents full into the were-beast’s eyes.

The effect was instantaneous. The creature howled in agony, clawing bloody lumps out of its own face as the silver burned like acid into its magic-altered flesh.

Konniger turned and ran, gratified that the tales of were-beasts’ vulnerability to silver had not been wrong, but knowing that he had at best only bought himself a few more seconds’ time.

Where are you, Vido? he wondered desperately, praying that his servant's wits had not deserted him on this of all nights.

He could hear the creature's snarls of rage right behind him, hear the scrape of its claws as it launched itself at his unprotected back. Reaching out to anchor himself against a nearby gravestone, Konniger pivoted and lashed out with one leg, aiming a blow at the creature in that strange but highly effective fighting style he had learned years before off a travelling sage from Cathay. The blow connected solidly with the creature's midsection and would have crippled any normal opponent. The wolf-thing barely noticed, striking out with its claws and savagely back-handing him across the face.

Konniger flew through the air, connecting heavily against the stump of a broken grave marker. The salty taste of his own blood filled his mouth; the sharp pain something broken inside him flared up from within his ribcage; his vision swam and he knew he was close to blacking out. He looked up, the bright disc of the Red Moon seeming to swell to fill up the night sky above him. Its unnatural light bathed the scene, seeming to slow down time itself as Konniger struggled to fight off unconsciousness.

As the wolf-thing prowled the last few steps towards him.

And as the gaunt figure of Vault Steiner glided out of the shadows, red moonlight reflecting brightly off the silver-bladed throwing dagger held ready in his hand.

The dagger flew through the air, burying itself into the wolf-thing's chest and piercing its heart. The Chaos creature fell without a sound, a life that could be measured in millennia ignominiously snuffed out in the blink of an eye.

'Master!' Konniger heard Vido's voice; felt his servant's hands upon him, raising him up; dimly saw the torchlights of what seemed to be most of the city militia closing in from all sides of the cemetery.

'A dangerous game you played, Herr Konniger,' the Imperial assassin noted, planting his foot on the chest of the wolf-thing and pushing the dagger hilt-deep, further into its heart. 'And too much of a near thing, at the end. When you sent your servant to me with that message, how did you know the were-beast would seek to lure you here?'

'A... a hunch, nothing more,' Konniger managed to struggle out, gratefully accepting the brandy flask which Vido pressed into his hand. 'Call it a moment of prescience, inspired by the words of a madman.' Konniger shared a significant glance with his manservant. Vido knew – and strongly disapproved – of some of the more extreme methods his master employed to divine the ways of the servants of Chaos, but if he could guess at the true source of Konniger's prescient insight, then the Halfling wisely kept his silence.

Helped by his servant, Konniger struggled to his feet and looked down at the remains of the wolf-thing. Its jaws were set in a final snarl and its golden yellow eyes were open, its dying gaze fixed forever on its unholy patron moon overhead. Konniger leaned forward to look into those eyes, remembering the conversation between himself and the thing that had been van Sandt when they first met.

How old was it, truly, he wondered? What sights had those eyes witnessed over the path of so many centuries? What would he give, to be able to know even just a few of the memories stored behind those eyes? But if the answer lay in those dead eyes, then he did not find it, seeing only the twin, dim reflections of the Red Moon staring mockingly back at him.

He turned his back on the remains of the wolf-thing and walked away without looking back. Vido walked beside him, offering his shoulder as support for his injured master to lean on. Overhead, dark clouds flitted across the night sky, eclipsing the fading light of the now waning Red Moon. ●



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Know Thine Enemy. by Gav Thorpe

'For the Emperor and Vulkan!' Ramesis cried as he sprinted forward. The air was filled by a soft whistling noise and tiny slivers of crystal started to patter off the armour of the Space Marines around him. Behind him Ramesis heard a startled cry. He looked back over his shoulder to see Brother Lastus clutching at his helmet with one hand. As the Chaplain looked on, the toxins contained within the crystal sliver were already seeping into Lastus's bloodstream. The Space Marine gave a choked cry and his body began to shudder. The power armour amplified the shivering Space Marine's movements into flailing paroxysms as Lastus fell.

Rat in the Walls. by Alex Hammond

Knife-Edge Liz closed on Terrak Ran'Lo. The old man was moving for cover, crouching behind a side-table. She screamed his name but her prey did not notice her. She fell upon him, dragging him to the ground. His breath was wine-rancid, his eyes glazed with age.

'Who?' He looked at Liz, her face sprayed with the blood of the Inquisitor, and his eyes span.

'A message from the Underhive,' Liz spat and pulled the trigger.

The Lives of Ferag Lion-Wolf. by Barrington J. Bayley

Ferag Lion-Wolf, Champion of Tzeentch, ruler of five worlds, rose from the slab of sparkling white alabaster on which he slept and prepared to receive his honoured visitor. Young maidens dressed him in garments of shimmering heliotrope silk and accoutred him with his weapons. When they had finished, an officer wearing the uniform of the palace staff entered and bowed 'The chariot of Lord Quillilil has been sighted entering our planetary system, my great and gracious lord. It will arrive within the hour.'

'Good...' Ferag purred.

Red Moon Over Altdorf. by Gordon Rennie

Blades, cruel and sharp, scratching on worn stone. The killer stretches, drawing new strength from the unboly radiation shining down upon it, and raises its head, already inhuman eyes altering to receive the invisible spectrum of secrets revealed only under the cold radiance of its heavenly patron. From its rooftop perch, it casts its magic-altered sight over the city below. The killer raises its snout and howls, offering up a prayer of thanks to its patron moon. Morrslieb, second moon of the Old World. Red moon. Killer's moon. Chaos moon.

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